Galaxy
MAGAZINE

50c

FEBRUARY 1959

NEW! 196 PAGES

INSTALLMENT PLAN
by
CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

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I, PLINGLOT, WHO YOU?
by
FREDERICK POHL

•

TIME KILLER
by
ROBERT SHECKLEY

•

MONSTERS OF THE DEEP
by
WILLY LEY

•

and Stories by
J. F. BONE
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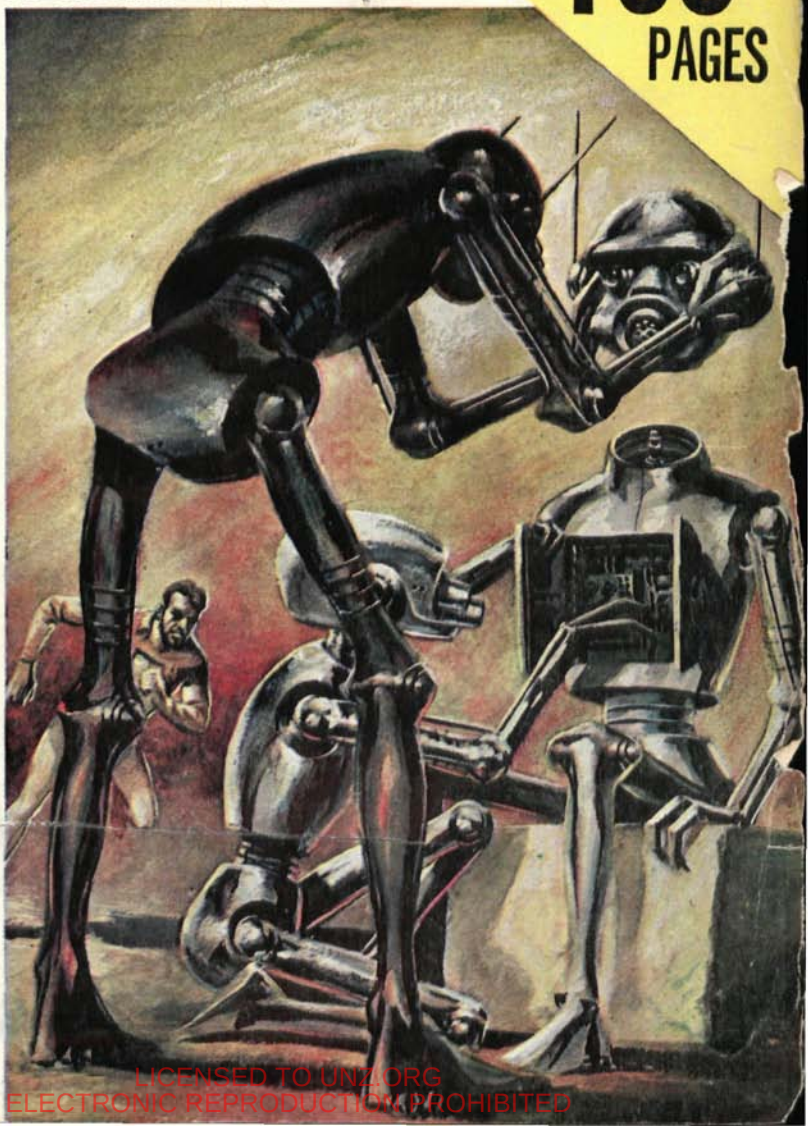

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In expanding to the giant 196-page size, we decided first to honor all our subscriptions at the old rate of $3.50 for 12 issues, despite the increase in cost. Then we concluded that this would frustrate readers who also wished to get in on a good thing, and we invited them to subscribe at the old rate, and limited the offer to 30 days. Now, however, we find that we have attracted new readers who resent being discriminated against. To give everyone an absolutely final fair chance, here is your savings coupon. Use it to buy a new subscription, to extend an old one, to give as gifts. And do it now—this big, generous bargain will not be repeated, no matter who howls!

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WHAT'LL IT BE?

HERE in your hands is the first issue of the giant new 196-page GALAXY.

Well, thanks, but we'd much rather view it as just what it is—one arbitrary solution out of a good many possibles.

What are the alternatives? Look at it this way. Having 196 pages to move around in is like your home suddenly becoming 50% bigger — along with half again as much money to make it what you want it to be. Translate magazine divisions into household terms and the choices are nearly identical: all bedrooms; or one extra bedroom, another bathroom and a den; or a spare living room and a pantry; or enlarge all the rooms you now have, or break down the walls and redesign the whole house?

We are prepared to do any of that to make GALAXY exactly what you want it to be, just as we did back in 1950. We asked then for this sort of advice, and our readers told us, and the advice made GALAXY the most widely read science fiction magazine in the world. If that sounds mystical, it's the reverse that really is — editors can only make more or less shrewd divinations, whereas readers know what they want.

But it is nearly a decade since we invited votes. That's long enough for any number of new factors to enter: tastes change; what once was fresh and daring may now be too familiar; and, most important of all, turnover of readership — a point we'll get to in a moment — means that many readers never had a say.

For those who missed or mislaid it, we'll list again the points up for referendum:

• To begin with, the heart of the magazine — stories. With all these added pages, we could pull a too prevalent flimflam: bloating up an artificial table of contents by running lots of very little stories and buckshot filler—but with 196 pages to do it in, our table of contents would be several times longer than most of the runty items listed.

That policy makes sense *only* if readers prefer batches of squibs to fewer but much heftier stories. Well, do you?

This issue, for example, holds down the short stories for the sake of a pair of tall novelets and a really wide-shouldered novella. If that's overstressing long stories, in your opinion, there could have been, say, three or four novelets and at least as many short stories.

(Continued on page 6)

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FEBRUARY, 1959 **Galaxy** VOL. 17, NO. 3

Also Published in
Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Finland and Sweden

CONTENTS

NOVELLA

INSTALLMENT PLAN ..... *by Clifford D. Simak* 8

NOVELETS

I PLINGLOT, WHO YOU? ..... *by Frederik Pohl* 68
INSIDEKICK ..... *by J. F. Bone* 106

SHORT STORIES

PASTORAL AFFAIR ..... *by Charles A. Stearns* 56
FOREVER ..... *by Ned Lang* 144

BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL — Conclusion

TIME KILLER ..... *by Robert Sheckley* 156

SCIENCE DEPARTMENT

FOR YOUR INFORMATION ..... *by Willy Ley* 94
Monsters of the Deep

FEATURES

EDITOR'S PAGE ..... *by H. L. Gold* 4
FORECAST 139
GALAXY'S FIVE STAR SHELF ..... *by Floyd C. Gale* 140

Cover by WOOD illustrating INSTALLMENT PLAN.

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GALAXY MAGAZINE is published bi-monthly by Galaxy Publishing Corporation. Main offices: 421 Hudson Street, New York 14, N. Y. 50¢ per copy. Subscription: (6 copies) $2.50 per year in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions. Elsewhere $3.50. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office, New York, N. Y. Copyright, New York 1958, by Galaxy Publishing Corporation, Robert M. Guinn, president. All rights, including translations reserved. All material submitted must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental.

Printed in the U.S.A. by The Guinn Co., Inc., N. Y. Title Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

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(Continued from page 4)

Or should it be still fewer long lengths and more shorts? The combinations are no problem. The only question is which lengths you like most.

• How about serials? The best solution — running them complete — can't be done; they'd squeeze out everything else. Worse yet, that would also kill book, paperbound reprint and club sales for the authors — book publishers won't touch novels that have appeared uncut in single issues. With 196 pages, we can run them in two equal installments and have plenty of room for other material. There's a two-month wait, true, but isn't that better than three or four monthly installments? Before you decide, think if you'd have been willing to miss reading *The Demolished Man, Gravy Planet, The Puppet Masters, The Stars My Destination*—and now *Time Killer.*

It's a tough decision. That's why we ask you to help make it.

• What do you think of articles? Is our science department a good solution? If so, why — and how can it be made better? If not, what would you prefer?

• Do you like our editor's page? Should it be lighter? Heavier? Not at all?

• Readers voted against a letter column back in 1950, a big surprise because we like them in newspapers and magazines, and had planned to have one. Is it that readers feared a letter column *must* be juvenile or pedantic? It needn't be, if it's shut down when no interesting mail comes in. What's your vote now, eight years later?

• How about our book reviews?

• Any thoughts on our cover and inside art, layouts, typography?

• In short, if you had a magazine of your own, what would it be like? Tell us and we'll do our honest best to make GALAXY as close as possible to your idea of an ideal magazine.

THOSE are the questions we asked in the Nov. 1950 and Dec. 1958 issues. Now the turnover of readership mentioned before:

All surveys show that all magazines have an all but complete change of audience every five years. We have constant evidence of that in the letters piteously begging us to reprint early GALAXY stories. We've resisted. But those fine tales are not to be found anywhere any more. If we ran just one per issue, wouldn't it be at little cost to the elite minority that owns files?

On all these matters, your opinion *counts.* Your suggestions *will* be followed. GALAXY really *is* your magazine.

— H. L. GOL

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INSTALLMENT PLAN

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

No crew was ever equipped to skin cats in more ingenious ways — and no planet better equipped to give them a merciless hiding!

Illustrated by WOOD

I

THE mishap came at dusk, as the last floater was settling down above the cargo dump, the eight small motors flickering bluely in the twilight.

One instant it was floating level, a thousand feet above the ground, descending gently, with its cargo stacked upon it and the riding robots perched atop the cargo. The next instant it tilted as first one motor failed and then a second one. The load of cargo spilled and the riding robots with it. The floater, unbalanced, became a screaming wheel, spinning crazily, that whipped in a tightening, raging spiral down upon the base.

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Steve Sheridan tumbled from the pile of crates stacked outside his tent. A hundred yards away, the cargo hit with a thundering crash that could be heard and felt above the screaming of the floater. The crates and boxes came apart and the crushed and twisted merchandise spread into a broken mound.

Sheridan dived for the open tent flaps and, as he did, the floater hit, slicing into the radio shack, which had been set up less than an hour before. It tore a massive hole into the ground, half burying itself, throwing up a barrage of sand and gravel that bulleted across the area, drumming like a storm of sleet against the tent.

A pebble grazed Sheridan's forehead and he felt the blast of sand against his cheek. Then he was inside the tent and scrambling for the transmog chest that stood beside the desk.

"Hezekiah!" he bawled. "Hezekiah, where are you!"

He fumbled his ring of keys and found the right one and got it in the lock. He twisted and the lid of the chest snapped open.

Outside, he could hear the pounding of running robot feet.

He thrust back the cover of the chest and began lifting out the compartments in which the transmogs were racked.

"Hezekiah!" he shouted.

For Hezekiah was the one who knew where all the transmogs were; he could lay his hands upon any one of them that might be needed without having to hunt for it.

BEHIND Sheridan, the canvas rustled and Hezekiah came in with a rush. He brushed Sheridan to one side.

"Here, let me, sir," he said.

"We'll need some roboticists," said Sheridan. "Those boys must be smashed up fairly bad."

"Here they are. You better handle them, sir. You do it better than any one of us."

Sheridan took the three transmogs and dropped them in the pocket of his jacket.

"I'm sorry there are no more, sir," Hezekiah said. "That is all we have."

"These will have to do," said Sheridan. "How about the radio shack? Was anyone in there?"

"I understand that it was quite empty. Silas had just stepped out of it. He was very lucky, sir."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Sheridan.

He ducked out of the tent and ran toward the mound of broken crates and boxes. Robots were swarming over it, digging frantically. As he ran, he saw them stoop and lift free a mass of tangled metal. They hauled it from the pile and carried it out and laid it on the ground and stood there looking at it.

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Sheridan came up to the group that stood around the mass of metal.

"Abe," he panted, "did you get out both of them?"

Abraham turned around. "Not yet, Steve. Max is still in there."

Sheridan pushed his way through the crowd and dropped on his knees beside the mangled robot. The midsection, he saw, was so deeply dented that the front almost touched the back. The legs were limp and the arms were canted and locked at a crazy angle. The head was twisted and the crystal eyes were vacant.

"Lem," he whispered. "Lemuel, can you hear me?"

"No, he can't," said Abraham. "He's really busted up."

"I have roboticists in my pocket." Sheridan got to his feet. "Three of them. Who wants a go at it? It'll have to be fast work."

"Count me in," Abraham said, "and Ebenezer there and . . ."

"Me, too," volunteered Joshua.

"We'll need tools," said Abraham. "We can't do a thing unless we have some tools."

"Here are the tools," Hezekiah called out, coming on the trot. "I knew you would need them."

"And light," said Joshua. "It's getting pretty dark, and from the looks of it, we'll be tinkering with his brain."

"We'll have to get him up someplace," declared Abraham, "so we can work on him. We can't with him lying on the ground."

"You can use the conference table," Sheridan suggested.

"Hey, some of you guys," yelled Abraham, "get Lem over there on the conference table."

"We're digging here for Max," Gideon yelled back. "Do it yourself."

"We can't," bawled Abraham. "Steve is fixing to get our transmogs changed . . ."

"Sit down," ordered Sheridan. "I can't reach you standing up. And has someone got a light?"

"I have one, sir," said Hezekiah, at his elbow. He held out a flash.

"Turn it on those guys so I can get the transmogs in."

THREE robots came stamping over and picked up the damaged Lemuel. They lugged him off toward the conference table.

In the light of the flash, Sheridan got out his keys, shuffled swiftly through them and found the one he wanted.

"Hold that light steady. I can't do this in the dark."

"Once you did," said Ebenezer. "Don't you remember, Steve? Out on Galanova. Except you couldn't see the labels and you got a missionary one into Ulysses when you thought you had a woodsman and he started preaching. Boy, was that a night!"

"Shut up," said Sheridan, "and

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hold still. How do you expect me to get these into you if you keep wiggling?"

He opened the almost invisible plate in the back of Ebenezer's skull and slid it quickly down, reached inside and found the spacehand transmog. With a quick twist, he jerked it out and dropped it in his pocket, then popped in the roboticist transmog, clicked it into place and drove it home. Then he shoved up the brain plate and heard it lock with a tiny click.

Swiftly he moved along. He had switched the transmogs in the other two almost as soon as Ebenezer had regained his feet and picked up the kit of tools.

"Come on, men," said Ebenezer. "We have work to do on Lem."

The three went striding off.

Sheridan looked around. Hezekiah and his light had disappeared, galloping off somewhere, more than likely, to see to something else.

The robots still were digging into the heap of merchandise. He ran around the pile to help them. He began pulling stuff from the pile and throwing it aside.

Beside him, Gideon asked: "What did you run into, Steve?"

"Huh?"

"Your face is bloody."

Sheridan put up his hand. His face was wet and sticky. "A piece of gravel must have hit me."

"Better have Hezekiah fix it."

"After Max is out," said Sheridan, going back to work.

They found Maximilian fifteen minutes later, at the bottom of the heap. His body was a total wreck, but he still could talk.

"It sure took you guys long enough," he said.

"Ah, dry up," Reuben said. "I think you engineered this so you could get a new body."

They hauled him out and skidded him along the ground. Bits of broken arms and legs kept dropping off him. They plunked him on the ground and ran toward the radio shack.

Maximilian squalled after them: "Hey, come back! You can't just dump me here!"

SHERIDAN squatted down beside him. "Take it easy, Max. The floater hit the radio shack and there's trouble over there."

"Lemuel? How is Lemuel?"

"Not too good. The boys are working on him."

"I don't know what happened, Steve. We were going all right and all at once the floater bucked us off."

"Two of the motors failed," said Sheridan. "Just why, we'll probably never know, now that the floater's smashed. You sure you feel all right?"

"Positive. But don't let the fellows fool around. It would be just like them to hold out on a body.

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Just for laughs. Don't let them."

"You'll have one as soon as we can manage. I imagine Hezekiah is out running down spare bodies."

"It does beat all," said Maximilian. "Here we had all the cargo down — a billion dollars' worth of cargo and we hadn't broken —"

"That's the way it is, Max. You can't beat the averages."

Maximilian chuckled. "You human guys," he said. "You always figure averages and have hunches and . . ."

Gideon came running out of the darkness. "Steve, we got to get those floater motors stopped. They're running wild. One of them might blow."

"But I thought you fellows —"

"Steve, it's more than a spacehand job. It needs a nuclear technician."

"Come with me."

"Hey!" yelled Maximilian.

"I'll be back," said Sheridan.

At the tent, there was no sign of Hezekiah. Sheridan dug wildly through the transmog chest. He finally located a nuclear technician transmog.

"I guess you're elected," he said to Gideon.

"Okay," the robot said. "But make it fast. One of those motors can blow and soak the entire area with radiation. It wouldn't bother us much, but it would be tough on you."

Sheridan clicked out the spacehand transmog, shoved the other in.

"Be seeing you," said Gideon, dashing from the tent.

Sheridan stood staring at the scattered transmogs.

Hezekiah will give me hell, he thought.

NAPOLEON walked into the tent. He had his white apron tucked into the belt. His white cook's hat was canted on his head.

"Steve," he asked, "how would you like a cold supper for tonight?"

"I guess it would be all right."

"That floater didn't only hit the shack. It also flattened the stove."

"A cold supper is fine. Will you do something for me?"

"What is it?"

"Max is out there, scared and busted up and lonely. He'll feel better in the tent."

Napoleon went out, grumbling: "Me, a chef, lugging a guy . . ."

Sheridan began picking up the transmogs, trying to get them racked back in order once again.

Hezekiah returned. He helped pick up the transmogs, began rearranging them.

"Lemuel will be all right, sir," he assured Sheridan. "His nervous system was all tangled up and short-circuiting. They had to cut out great hunks of wiring. About all they have at the moment, sir, is a naked brain. It will take a

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while to get him back into a body and all hooked up correctly."

"We came out lucky, Hezekiah."

"I suppose you are right, sir. I imagine Napoleon told you about the stove."

Napoleon came in, dragging the wreckage that was Maximilian, and propped it against the desk.

"Anything else?" he asked with withering sarcasm.

"No, thank you, Nappy. That is all."

"Well," demanded Maximilian, "how about my body?"

"It will take a while," Sheridan told him. "The boys have their hands full with Lemuel. But he's going to be all right."

"That's fine," said Maximilian. "Lem is a damn good robot. It would be a shame to lose him."

"We don't lose many of you," Sheridan observed.

"No," said Maximilian. "We're plenty tough. It takes a lot to destroy us."

"Sir," Hezekiah said, "you seem to be somewhat injured. Perhaps I should call in someone and put a medic transmog in him . . ."

"It's all right," said Sheridan. "Just a scratch. If you could find some water, so I could wash my face?"

"Certainly, sir. If it is only minor damage, perhaps I can patch you up."

He went to find the water.

"That Hezekiah is a good guy, too," said Maximilian, in an expansive mood. "Some of the boys think at times that he's a sort of sissy, but he comes through in an emergency."

"I couldn't get along without Hezekiah," Sheridan answered evenly. "We humans aren't rough and tough like you. We need someone to look after us. Hezekiah's job is in the very best tradition."

"Well, what's eating you?" asked Maximilian. "I *said* he was a good guy."

HEZEKIAH came back with a can of water and a towel. "Here's the water, sir. Gideon said to tell you the motors are okay. They have them all shut off."

"I guess that just about buttons it all up — if they're sure of Lemuel," Sheridan said.

"Sir, they seemed very sure."

"Well, fine," said Maximilian, with robotic confidence. "Tomorrow morning we can start on the selling job."

"I imagine so," Sheridan said, standing over the can of water and taking off his jacket.

"This will be an easy one. We'll be all cleaned up and out of here in ninety days or less."

Sheridan shook his head. "No, Max. There's no such thing as an easy one."

He bent above the can and sloshed water on his face and head.

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And that was true, he insisted to himself. An alien planet was an alien planet, no matter how you approached it. No matter how thorough the preliminary survey, no matter how astute the planning, there still would always be that lurking factor one could not foresee.

Maybe if a crew could stick to just one sort of job, he thought, it eventually might be possible to work out what amounted to a foolproof routine. But that was not the way it went when one worked for Central Trading.

Central Trading's interests ran to many different things. Garson IV was sales. Next time it could just as well be a diplomatic mission or a health-engineering job. A man never knew what he and his crew of robots might be in for until he was handed his assignment.

He reached for the towel.

"You remember Carver VII?" he asked Maximilian.

"Sure, Steve. But that was just hard luck. It wasn't Ebenezer's fault he made that small mistake."

"Moving the wrong mountain is not a small mistake," Sheridan observed with pointed patience.

"That one goes right back to Central," Maximilian declared, with a show of outrage. "They had the blueprints labeled wrong . . ."

"Now let's hold it down," Sheridan advised. "It is past and done with. There's no sense in getting all riled up."

"Maybe so," said Maximilian, "but it burns me. Here we go and make ourselves a record no other team can touch. Then Central pulls this boner and pins the blame on us. I tell you, Central's got too big and clumsy."

And smug as well, thought Sheridan, but he didn't say it.

TOO big and too complacent in a lot of ways. Take this very planet, for example. Central should have sent a trading team out here many years ago, but instead had fumed and fussed around, had connived and schemed; they had appointed committees to delve into the situation and there had been occasional mention of it at the meetings of the board, but there had been nothing done until the matter had ground its way through the full and awesome maze of very proper channels.

A little competition, Sheridan told himself, was the very thing that Central needed most. Maybe, if there were another outfit out to get the business, Central Trading might finally rouse itself off its big, fat dignity, he was thinking when Napoleon came clumping in and banged a plate and glass and bottle down upon the table. The plate was piled with cold cuts and sliced vegetables; the bottle contained beer.

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Sheridan looked surprised. "I didn't know we had beer."

"Neither did I," said Napoleon, "but I looked and there it was. Steve, it's getting so you never know what is going on."

Sheridan tossed away the towel and sat down at the desk. He poured a glass of beer.

"I'd offer you some of this," he told Maximilian, "except I know it would rust your guts."

Napoleon guffawed.

"Right as of this moment," Maximilian said, "I haven't any guts to speak of. Most of them's dropped out."

Abraham came tramping briskly in. "I hear you have Max hidden out some place."

"Right here, Abe," called Maximilian eagerly.

"You certainly are a mess," said Abraham. "Here we were going fine until you two clowns gummed up the works."

"How is Lemuel?" asked Sheridan.

"He's all right," said Abraham. "The other two are working on him and they don't really need me. So I came hunting Max." He said to Napoleon, "Here, grab hold and help me get him to the table. We have good light out there."

Grumbling, Napoleon lent a hand. "I've lugged him around half the night," he complained. "Let's not bother with him. Let's just toss him on the scrap heap."

"It would serve him right," Abraham agreed, with pretended wrath.

The two went out, carrying Maximilian between them. He still was dropping parts.

HEZEKIAH finished with the transmog chest, arranging all the transmogs neatly in their place. He closed the lid with some satisfaction.

"Now that we're alone," he said, "let me see your face."

Sheridan grunted at him through a mouth stuffed full of food.

Hezekiah looked him over. "Just a scratch on the forehead, but the left side of your face, sir, looks as if someone had sandpapered it. You are sure you don't want to transmog someone? A doctor should have a look at it."

"Just leave it as it is," said Sheridan. "It will be all right."

Gideon stuck his head between the tent flaps. "Hezekiah, Abe is raising hell about the body you found for Max. He says it's an old, rebuilt job. Have you got another one?"

"I can look and see," said Hezekiah. "It was sort of dark. There are several more. We can look them over."

He left with Gideon, and Sheridan was alone.

He went on eating, mentally checking through the happenings of the evening.

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It had been hard luck, of course, but it could have been far worse. One had to expect accidents and headaches every now and then. After all, they had been downright lucky. Except for some lost time and a floater load of cargo, they had come out unscathed.

All in all, he assured himself, they'd made a good beginning. The cargo sled and ship were swinging in tight orbits, the cargo had been ferried down and on this small peninsula, jutting out into the lake, they had as much security as one might reasonably expect on any alien planet.

The Garsonians, of course, were not belligerent, but even so one could never afford to skip security.

He finished eating and pushed the plate aside. He pulled a portfolio out of a stack of maps and paper work lying on the desk. Slowly he untied the tapes and slid the contents out. For the hundredth time, at least, he started going through the summary of reports brought back to Central Trading by the first two expeditions.

MAN first had come to the planet more than twenty years ago to make a preliminary check, bringing back field notes, photographs and samples. It had been mere routine; there had been no thorough or extensive survey. There had been no great hope nor expectation; it had been simply another job to do. Many planets were similarly spot-checked, and in nineteen out of twenty of them, nothing ever came of it.

But something very definite had come of it in the case of Garson IV.

The something was a tuber that appeared quite ordinary, pretty much, in fact, like an undersize, shriveled-up potato. Brought back by the survey among other odds and ends picked up on the planet, it had in its own good time been given routine examination and analysis by the products laboratory — with startling results.

From the *podar*, the tuber's native designation, had been derived a drug which had been given a long and agonizing name and had turned out to be the almost perfect tranquilizer. It appeared to have no untoward side-effects; it was not lethal if taken in too enthusiastic dosage; it was slightly habit-forming, a most attractive feature for all who might be concerned with the sale of it.

To a race vitally concerned with an increasing array of disorders traceable to tension, such a drug was a boon, indeed. For years, a search for such a tranquilizer had been carried on in the laboratories and here it suddenly was, a gift from a new-found planet.

Within an astonishingly short time, considering the deliberation with which Central Trading usual-

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ly operated, a second expedition had been sent out to Garson IV, with the robotic team heavily transmogged as trade experts, psychologists and diplomatic functionaries. For two years the team had worked, with generally satisfactory results. When they had blasted off for Earth, they carried a cargo of the *podars*, a mass of meticulously gathered data and a trade agreement under which the Garsonians agreed to produce and store the *podars* against the day when another team should arrive to barter for them.

And that, thought Sheridan, is us.

And it was all right, of course, except that they were late by fifteen years.

For Central Trading, after many conferences, had decided to grow the *podars* on the Earth. This, the economists had pointed out, would be far cheaper than making the long and expensive trips that would be necessary to import them from a distant planet. That it might leave the Garsonians holding the bag insofar as the trade agreement was concerned seemed not to have occurred to anyone at all. Although, considering the nature of the Garsonians, they probably had not been put out too greatly.

For the Garsonians were a shiftless tribe at best and it had been with some initial difficulty that the second team had been able to explain to them the mechanics and desirability of interstellar trade. Although, in fairness, it might be said of them that, once they understood it, they had been able to develop a creditable amount of eagerness to do business.

PODARS had taken to the soil of Earth with commendable adaptiveness. They had grown bigger and better than they'd ever grown on their native planet. This was not surprising when one took into account the slap-dash brand of agriculture practiced by the Garsonians.

Using the tubers brought back by the second expedition for the initial crop, it required several years of growing before a sufficient supply of seed *podars* were harvested to justify commercial growing.

But finally that had come about and the first limited supply of the wonder drug had been processed and put on sale with wide advertising fanfare and an accompanying high price.

And all seemed well, indeed.

Once again the farmers of the Earth had gained a new cash crop from an alien planet. Finally Man had the tranquilizer which he'd sought for years.

But as the years went by, some of the enthusiasm dimmed. For the drug made from the *podars* appeared to lose its potency. Either

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it had not been as good as first believed or there was some factor lacking in its cultivation on Earth.

The laboratories worked feverishly on the problem. The *podars* were planted in experimental plots on other planets in the hope that the soil or air or general characteristics there might supply the needed element — if missing element it were.

And Central Trading, in its ponderous, bureaucratic fashion, began preliminary plans for importation of the tubers, remembering belatedly, perhaps, the trade agreement signed many years before. But the plans were not pushed too rapidly, for any day, it was believed, the answer might be found that would save the crop for Earth.

But when the answer came, it ruled out Earth entirely; it ruled out, in fact, every place but the *podar's* native planet. For, the laboratories found, the continued potency of the drug relied to a large extent upon the chemical reaction of a protozoan which the *podar* plants nourished in their roots. And the protozoan flourished, apparently, on Garson IV alone.

So finally, after more than fifteen years, the third expedition had started out for Garson IV. And had landed and brought the cargo down and now was ready, in the morning, to start trading for the *podars*.

Sheridan flipped idly through the sheets from the portfolio. There was, he thought, actually no need to look at all the data once again. He knew it all by heart.

THE canvas rustled and Hezekiah stepped into the tent.

Sheridan looked up. "Good," he said, "you're back. Did you get Max fixed up?"

"We found a body, sir, that proved acceptable."

Sheridan pushed the pile of reports aside. "Hezekiah, what are your impressions?"

"Of the planet, sir?"

"Precisely."

"Well, it's those barns, sir. You saw them, sir, when we were coming down. I believe I mentioned them to you."

Sheridan nodded. "The second expedition taught the natives how to build them. To store the *podars* in."

"All of them painted red," the robot said. "Just like the barns we have on Christmas cards."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"They look a little weird, sir."

Sheridan laughed. "Weird or not, those barns will be the making of us. They must be crammed with *podars*. For fifteen years, the natives have been piling up their *podars*, more than likely wondering when we'd come to trade . . ."

"There were all those tiny villages," Hezekiah said, "and those big red barns in the village square.

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It looked, if you will pardon the observation, sir, like a combination of New England and Lower Slobbovia."

"Well, not quite Lower Slobbovia. Our Garsonian friends are not as bad as that. They may be somewhat shiftless and considerably scatterbrained, but they keep their villages neat and their houses spic and span."

He pulled a photograph from a pile of data records. "Here, take a look at this."

The photograph showed a village street, neat and orderly and quiet, with its rows of well-kept houses huddled underneath the shade trees. There were rows of gay flowers running along the roadway and there were people — little, happy, gnomelike people — walking in the road.

Hezekiah picked it up. "I will admit, sir, that they look fairly happy. Although, perhaps, not very smart."

Sheridan got to his feet. "I think I'll go out and check around and see how things are going."

"Everything is all right, sir," said Hezekiah. "The boys have the wreckage cleared up. I'm sorry to have to tell you, sir, that not much of the cargo could be saved."

"From the looks of it, I'm surprised we could salvage any of it."

"Don't stay out too long," Hezekiah warned him. "You'll need a good night's sleep. Tomorrow will be a busy day and you'll be out at the crack of dawn."

"I'll be right back," Sheridan promised and ducked out of the tent.

BATTERIES of camp lights had been erected and now held back the blackness of the night. The sound of hammering came from the chewed-up area where the floater had come down. There was no sign of the floater now and a gang of spacehand robots were busily going about the building of another radio shack. Another gang was erecting a pavilion tent above the conference table, where Abraham and his fellow roboticists still worked on Lemuel and Maximilian. And in front of the cook shack, Napoleon and Gideon were squatted down, busily shooting craps.

Sheridan saw that Napoleon had set up his outdoors stove again.

He walked over to them and they turned their heads and greeted him, then went back to their game.

Sheridan watched them for a while and then walked slowly on.

He shook his head in some bewilderment — a continuing bewilderment over this robotic fascination with all the games of chance. It was, he supposed, just one of the many things that a human being — any human being — would never understand.

For gambling seemed entirely

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pointless from a robotic point of view. They had no property, no money, no possessions. They had no need of any and they had no wish for any — and yet they gambled madly.

It might be, he told himself, no more than an aping of their fellow humans. By his very nature, a robot was barred effectively from participating in most of the human vices. But gambling was something that he could do as easily and perhaps more efficiently than any human could.

But what in the world, he wondered, did they get out of it? No gain, no profit, for there were no such things as gain or profit so far as a robot was concerned. Excitement, perhaps? An outlet for aggressiveness?

Or did they keep a phantom score within their mind — mentally chalking up their gains and loss — and did a heavy winner at a game of chance win a certain prestige that was not visible to Man, that might, in fact, be carefully hidden from a man?

A man, he thought, could never know his robots in their entirety and that might be as well — it would be an unfair act to strip the final shreds of individuality from a robot.

For if the robots owed much to Man — their conception and their manufacture and their life — by the same token Man owed as much, or even more, to robots.

Without the robots, Man could not have gone as far or fast, or as effectively, out into the Galaxy. Sheer lack of transportation for skilled manpower alone would have held his progress to a crawl.

But with the robots there was no shipping problem.

And with the transmogs there was likewise no shortage of the kind of brains and skills and techniques — as there would otherwise have been — necessary to cope with the many problems found on the far-flung planets.

HE came to the edge of the camp area and stood, with the lights behind him, facing out into the dark from which came the sound of running waves and the faint moaning of the wind.

He tilted back his head and stared up at the sky and marveled once again, as he had marveled many other times on many other planets, at the sheer, devastating loneliness and alienness of unfamiliar stars.

Man pinned his orientation to such fragile things, he thought — to the way the stars were grouped, to how a flower might smell, to the color of a sunset.

But this, of course, was not entirely unfamiliar ground. Two human expeditions already had touched down.

And now the third had come,

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bringing with it a cargo sled piled high with merchandise.

He swung around, away from the lake, and squinted at the area just beyond the camp and there the cargo was, piled in heaps and snugged down with tough plastic covers from which the starlight glinted. It lay upon the alien soil like a herd of hump-backed monsters bedded for the night.

There was no ship built that could handle that much cargo — no ship that could carry more than a dribble of the merchandise needed for interstellar trade.

For that purpose, there was the cargo sled.

The sled, set in an orbit around the planet of its origin, was loaded by a fleet of floaters, shuttling back and forth. Loaded, the sled was manned by robots and given the start on its long journey by the expedition ship. By the dint of the engines on the sled itself and the power of the expedition ship, the speed built up and up.

There was a tricky point when one reached the speed of light, but after that it became somewhat easier — although, for interstellar travel, there was need of speed many times in excess of the speed of light.

And so the sled sped on, following close behind the expedition ship, which served as a pilot craft through that strange gray area where space and time were twisted into something other than normal space and time.

Without robots, the cargo sleds would have been impossible; no human crew could ride a cargo ship and maintain the continuous routine of inspection that was necessary.

Sheridan swung back toward the lake again and wondered if he could actually see the curling whiteness of the waves or if it were sheer imagination. The wind was moaning softly and the stranger stars were there, and out beyond the waters the natives huddled in their villages with the big red barns looming in the starlit village squares.

II

IN the morning, the robots gathered around the conference table beneath the gay pavilion tent and Sheridan and Hezekiah lugged out the metal transmog boxes labeled SPECIAL — GARSON IV.

"Now I think," said Sheridan, "that we can get down to business, if you gentlemen will pay attention to me." He opened one of the transmog boxes. "In here, we have some transmogs tailor-made for the job that we're to do. Because we had prior knowledge of this planet, it was possible to fabricate this special set. So on this job we won't start from scratch, as we are often forced to do . . ."

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"Cut out the speeches, Steve," yelled Reuben, "and let's get started with this business."

"Let him talk," said Abraham. "He certainly has the right to, just like any one of us."

"Thank you, Abe," Sheridan said.

"Go ahead," said Gideon. "Rube's just discharging excess voltage."

"These transmogs are basically sales transmogs, of course. They will provide you with the personality and all the techniques of a salesman. But, in addition to that, they contain as well all the data pertaining to the situation here and the language of the natives, plus a mass of planetary facts."

He unlocked another of the boxes and flipped back the lid.

"Shall we get on with it?" he asked.

"Let's get going," demanded Reuben. "I'm tired of this spacehand transmog."

Sheridan made the rounds, with Hezekiah carrying the boxes for him.

Back at his starting point, he shoved aside the boxes, filled now with spacehand and other assorted transmogs. He faced the crew of salesmen.

"How do they feel?" he asked.

"They feel okay," said Lemuel. "You know, Steve, I never realized until now how dumb a spacehand is."

"Pay no attention to him," Abraham said, disgusted. "He always makes that crack."

Maximilian said soberly: "It shouldn't be too bad. These people have been acclimated to the idea of doing business with us. There should be no initial sales resistance. In fact, they may be anxious to start trading."

"Another thing," Douglas pointed out. "We have the kind of merchandise they've evinced interest in. We won't have to waste our time in extensive surveys to find out what they want."

"The market pattern seems to be a simple one," said Abraham judiciously. "There should be no complications. The principal thing, it would appear, is the setting of a proper rate of exchange — how many *podars* they must expect to pay for a shovel or a hoe or other items that we have."

"That will have to come," said Sheridan, "by a process of trial and error."

"We'll have to bargain hard," Lemuel said, "in order to establish a fictitious retail price, then let them have it wholesale. There are many times when that works effectively."

Abraham rose from his chair. "Let's get on with it. I suppose, Steve, that you will stay in camp."

Sheridan nodded. "I'll stay by the radio. I'll expect reports as soon as you can send them."

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THE robots got on with it. They scrubbed and polished one another until they fairly glittered. They brought out fancy dress hardware and secured it to themselves with magnetic clamps. There were colorful sashes and glistening rows of metals and large chunks of jewelry not entirely in the best of taste, but designed to impress the natives.

They got out their floaters and loaded up with samples from the cargo dump. Sheridan spread out a map and assigned each one a village. They checked their radios. They made sure they had their order boards.

By noon, they all were off.

Sheridan went back to the tent and sat down in his camp chair. He stared down the shelving beach to the lake, sparkling in the light of the noon-high sun.

Napoleon brought his lunch and hunkered down to talk, gathering his white cook's apron carefully in his lap so it would not touch the ground. He pushed his tall white cap to a rakish angle.

"How you got it figured, Steve?"

"You can never figure one beforehand," Sheridan told him. "The boys are all set for an easy time and I hope they have it. But this is an alien planet and I never bet on aliens."

"You look for any trouble?"

"I don't look for anything. I just sit and wait and hope feebly for the best. Once the reports start coming in . . ."

"If you worry so much, why not go out yourself?"

Sheridan shook his head. "Look at it this way, Nappy. I am not a salesman and this crew is. There'd be no sense in my going out. I'm not trained for it."

And, he thought, the fact of the matter was that he was not trained for anything. He was not a salesman and he was not a spacehand; he was not any of the things that the robots were or could be.

He was just a human, period, a necessary cog in a team of robots.

There was a law that said no robot or no group of robots could be assigned a task without human supervision, but that was not the whole of it. It was, rather, something innate in the robot makeup, not built into them, but something that was there and always might be there — the ever-present link between the robot and his human.

Sent out alone, a robot team would blunder and bog down, would in the end become unstuck entirely — would wind up worse than useless. With a human accompanying them, there was almost no end to their initiative and their capability.

It might, he thought, be their need of leadership, although in very truth the human member of the team sometimes showed little of that. It might be the necessity

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for some symbol of authority and yet, aside from their respect and consideration for their human, the robots actually bowed to no authority.

It was something deeper, Sheridan told himself, than mere leadership or mere authority. It was comparable to the affection and rapport which existed as an undying bond between a man and dog and yet it had no tinge of the god-worship associated with the dog.

HE said to Napoleon: "How about yourself? Don't you ever hanker to go out? If you'd just say the word, you could."

"I like to cook," Napoleon stated. He dug at the ground with a metal finger. "I guess, Steve, you could say I'm pretty much an old retainer."

"A transmog would take care of that in a hurry."

"And then who'd cook for you? You know you're a lousy cook."

Sheridan ate his lunch and sat in his chair, staring at the lake, waiting for the first reports on the radio.

The job at last was started. All that had gone before — the loading of the cargo, the long haul out through space, the establishing of the orbits and the unshipping of the cargo — had been no more than preliminary to this very moment.

The job was finally started, but it was far from done. There would be months of work. There would be many problems and a thousand headaches. But they'd get it done, he told himself with a sure pride. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, that could stump this gang of his.

Late in the afternoon, Hezekiah came with the word: "Abraham is calling, sir. It seems that there is trouble."

Sheridan leaped to his feet and ran to the shack. He pulled up a chair and reached for the headset. "That you, Abe? How is it going, boy?"

"Badly, Steve," said Abraham. "They aren't interested in doing business. They want the stuff, all right. You can see the way they look at it. But they aren't buying. You know what I think? I don't believe they have anything to trade."

"That's ridiculous, Abe! They've been growing *podars* all these years. The barns are crammed with them."

"Their barn is all nailed up," said Abraham. "They have bars across the doors and the windows boarded. When I tried to walk up to it, they acted sort of ugly."

"I'll be right out," decided Sheridan. "I want to look this over." He stood up and walked out of the shack. "Hezekiah, get the flier started. We're going out and have

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a talk with Abe. Nappy, you mind the radio. Call me at Abe's village if anything goes wrong."

"I'll stay right here beside it," Napoleon promised him.

Hezekiah brought the flier down in the village square, landing it beside the floater, still loaded with its merchandise.

Abraham strode over to them as soon as they were down. "I'm glad you came, Steve. They want me out of here. They don't want us around."

SHERIDAN climbed from the flier and stood stiffly in the square. There was a sense of wrongness—a wrongness with the village and the people — something wrong and different.

There were a lot of natives standing around the square, lounging in the doorways and leaning against the trees. There was a group of them before the barred door of the massive barn that stood in the center of the square, as if they might be a guard assigned to protect the barn.

"When I first came down," said Abraham, "they crowded around the floater and stood looking at the stuff and you could see they could hardly keep their hands off it. I tried to talk to them, but they wouldn't talk too much, except to say that they were poor. Now all they do is just stand off and glare."

The barn was a monumental structure when gauged against the tiny houses of the village. It stood up foursquare and solid and entirely without ornament and it was an alien thing — alien of Earth. For, Sheridan realized, it was the same kind of barn that he had seen on the backwoods farms of Earth — the great hip-roof, the huge barn door, the ramp up to the door, and even the louvered cupola that rode astride the ridge-pole.

The man and the two robots stood in a pool of hostile silence and the lounging natives kept on staring at them and there was something decidedly wrong.

Sheridan turned slowly and glanced around the square and suddenly he knew what the wrongness was.

The place was shabby; it approached the downright squalid. The houses were neglected and no longer neat and the streets were littered. And the people were a piece with all the rest of it.

"Sir," said Hezekiah, "they are a sorry lot."

And they were all of that.

There was something in their faces that had a look of haunting and their shoulders stooped and there was fatigue upon them.

"I can't understand it," said the puzzled Abraham. "The data says they were a happy-go-lucky bunch, but look at them out there. Could the data have been wrong?"

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"No, Abe. It's the people who have changed."

For there was no chance that the data could be wrong. It had been compiled by a competent team, one of the very best, and headed by a human who had long years of experience on many alien planets. The team had spent two years on Garson IV and had made it very much its business to know this race inside out.

Something had happened to the people. They had somehow lost their gaiety and pride. They had let the houses go uncared for. They had allowed themselves to become a race of ragamuffins.

"You guys stay here," Sheridan said.

"You can't do it, sir," said Hezekiah in alarm.

"Watch yourself," warned Abraham.

Sheridan walked toward the barn. The group before it did not stir. He stopped six feet away.

CLOSE up, they looked more gnomelike than they had appeared in the pictures brought back by the survey team. Little wizened gnomes, they were, but not happy gnomes at all. They were seedy-looking and there was resentment in them and perhaps a dash of hatred. They had a hangdog look and there were some among them who shuffled in discomfiture.

"I see you don't remember us," said Sheridan conversationally. "We were away too long, much longer than we had thought to be."

He was having, he feared, some trouble with the language. It was, in fact, not the easiest language in the Galaxy to handle. For a fleeting moment, he wished that there were some sort of transmog that could be slipped into the human brain. It would make moments like this so much easier.

"We remember you," said one of them in a sullen voice.

"That's wonderful," said Sheridan with forced enthusiasm. "Are you speaker for this village?"

Speaker because there was no leader, no chief — no government at all beyond a loose, haphazard talking over what daily problems they had, around the local equivalent of the general store, and occasional formless town meetings to decide what to do in their rare crises, but no officials to enforce the decisions.

"I can speak for them," the native said somewhat evasively. He shuffled slowly forward. "There were others like you who came many years ago."

"You were friends to them."

"We are friends to all."

"But special friends to them. To them you made the promise that you would keep the *podars*."

"Too long to keep the *podars*. The *podars* rot away."

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"You had the barn to store them in."

"One *podar* rots. Soon there are two *podars* rotten. And then a hundred *podars* rotten. The barn is no good to keep them. No place is any good to keep them."

"But we — those others showed you what to do. You go through the *podars* and throw away the rotten ones. That way you keep the other *podars* good."

The native shrugged. "Too hard to do. Takes too long."

"But not all the *podars* rotted. Surely you have some left."

The creature spread its hands. "We have bad seasons, friend. Too little rain, too much. It never comes out right. Our crop is always bad."

"But we have brought things to trade you for the *podars*. Many things you need. We had great trouble bringing them. We came from far away. It took us long to come."

"Too bad," the native said. "No *podars*. As you can see, we are very poor."

"But where have all the *podars* gone?"

"We," the man said stubbornly, "don't grow *podars* any more. We changed the *podars* into another crop. Too much bad luck with *podars*."

"But those plants out in the fields?"

"We do not call them *podars*."

"It doesn't matter what you call them. Are they *podars* or are they not?"

"We do not grow the *podars*."

SHERIDAN turned on his heel and walked back to the robots.

"No soap," he said. "Something's happened here. They gave me a poor-mouth story and finally, as a clincher, said they don't grow *podars* any more."

"But there are fields of *podars*," declared Abraham. "If the data's right, they've actually increased their acreage. I checked as I was coming in. They're growing more right now than they ever grew before."

"I know," said Sheridan. "It makes no sense at all. Hezekiah, maybe you should give base a call and find what's going on."

"One thing," Abraham pointed out. "What about this trade agreement that we have with them? Has it any force?"

Sheridan shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe we can wave it in their faces, just to see what happens. It might serve as a sort of psychological wedge a little later on, once we get them softened up a bit."

"*If* we get them softened up."

"This is our first day and this is only one village."

"You don't think we could use the agreement as a club?"

"Look, Abe, I'm not a lawyer, and we don't have a lawyer trans-

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mog along with us for a damned good reason — there isn't any legal setup whatever on this planet. But let's say we could haul them into a galactic court. Who signed for the planet? Some natives *we* picked as its representatives, not the natives themselves; their signing couldn't bind anything or anybody. The whole business of drawing up a contract was nothing but an impressive ceremony without any legal basis — it was just meant to awe the natives into doing business with us."

"But the second expedition must have figured it would work."

"Well, sure. The Garsonians have a considerable sense of morality — individually and as families. Can we make that sense of morality extend to bigger groups? That's our problem."

"That means we have to figure out an angle," said Abraham. "At least for this one village."

"If it's just this village," declared Sheridan, "we can let them sit and wait. We can get along without it."

But it wasn't just one village. It was all the rest of them, as well.

Hezekiah brought the news.

"Napoleon says everyone is having trouble," he announced. "No one sold a thing. From what he said, it's just like this all over."

"We better call in all the boys," said Sheridan. "This is a situation that needs some talking over. We'll have to plan a course of action. We can't go flying off at a dozen different angles."

"And we'd better pull up a hill of *podars*," Abraham suggested, "and see if they are *podars* or something else."

III

SHERIDAN inserted a chemist transmog into Ebenezer's brain case and Ebenezer ran off an analysis.

He reported to the sales conference seated around the table.

"There's just one difference," he said. "The *podars* that I analyzed ran a higher percentage of calenthropodensia—that's the drug used as a tranquilizer — than the *podars* that were brought in by the first and second expeditions. The factor is roughly ten per cent, although that might vary from one field to another, depending upon weather and soil conditions — I would suspect especially soil conditions."

"Then they lied," said Abraham, "when they said they weren't growing *podars*."

"By their own standards," observed Silas, "they might not have lied to us. You can't always spell out alien ethics — satisfactorily, that is — from the purely human viewpoint. Ebenezer says that the composition of the tuber has changed to some extent. Perhaps due to better cultivation, perhaps

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to better seed or to an abundance of rainfall or a heavier concentration of the protozoan in the soil — or maybe because of something the natives did deliberately to make it shift . . ."

"Si," said Gideon, "I don't see what you are getting at."

"Simply this. If they knew of the shift or change, it might have given them an excuse to change the *podar* name. Or their language or their rules of grammar might have demanded that they change it. Or they may have applied some verbal mumbo-pumbo so they would have an out. And it might even have been a matter of superstition. The native told Steve at the village that they'd had bad luck with *podars*. So perhaps they operated under the premise that if they changed the name, they likewise changed the luck."

"And this is ethical?"

"To them, it might be. You fellows have been around enough to know that the rest of the Galaxy seldom operates on what we view as logic or ethics."

"But I don't see," said Gideon, "why they'd want to change the name unless it was for the specific purpose of not trading with us — so they could tell us they weren't growing *podars*."

"I think that is exactly why they changed the name," Maximilian said. "It's all a piece with those nailed-up barns. They knew we had arrived. They could hardly have escaped knowing. We had clouds of floaters going up and down and they must have seen them."

"Back at that village," said Sheridan, "I had the distinct impression that they had some reluctance telling us they weren't growing *podars*. They had left it to the last, as if it were a final clincher they'd hoped they wouldn't have to use, a desperate, last-ditch argument when all the other excuses failed to do the trick and—"

"They're just trying to jack up the price," Lemuel interrupted in a flat tone.

MAXIMILIAN shook his head. "I don't think so. There was no price set to start with. How can you jack it up when you don't know what it is?"

"Whether there was a price or not," said Lemuel testily, "they still could create a situation where they could hold us up."

"There is another factor that might be to our advantage," Maximilian said. "If they changed the name so they'd have an excuse not to trade with us, that argues that the whole village feels a moral obligation and has to justify its refusal."

"You mean by that," said Sheridan, "that we can reason with them. Well, perhaps we can. I think at least we'll try."

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"There's too much wrong," Douglas put in. "Too many things have changed. The new name for the *podars* and the nailed-up barns and the shabbiness of the villages and the people. The whole planet's gone to pot. It seems to me our job — the first job we do — is to find what happened here. Once we find that out, maybe we'd have a chance of selling."

"I'D like to see the inside of those barns," said Joshua. "What have they got in there? Do you think there's any chance we might somehow get a look?"

"Nothing short of force," Abraham told him. "I have a hunch that while we're around, they'll guard them night and day."

"Force is out," said Sheridan. "All of you know what would happen to us if we used force short of self-defense against an alien people. The entire team would have its license taken away. You guys would spend the rest of your lives scrubbing out headquarters."

"Maybe we could just sneak around. Do some slick detective work."

"That's an idea, Josh," Sheridan said. "Hezekiah, do you know if we have some detective transmogs?"

"Not that I know of, sir. I have never heard of any team using them."

"Just as well," Abraham observed. "We'd have a hard time disguising ourselves."

"If we had a volunteer," Lemuel said with some enthusiasm, "we could redesign him . . ."

"It would seem to me," said Silas, "that what we have to do is figure out all the different approaches that are possible. Then we can try each approach on a separate village till we latch onto one that works."

"Which presupposes," Maximilian pointed out, "that each village will react the same."

Silas said: "I would assume they would. After all, the culture is the same and their communications must be primitive. No village would know what was happening in another village until some little time had passed, which makes each village a perfectly isolated guinea pig for our little tests."

"Si, I think you're right," said Sheridan. "Somehow or other we have to find a way to break their sales resistance. I don't care what kind of prices we have to pay for the *podars* at the moment. I'd be willing to let them skin us alive to start with. Once we have them buying, we can squeeze down the price and come out even in the end. After all, the main thing is to get that cargo sled of ours loaded down with all the *podars* it can carry."

"All right," said Abraham. "Let's get to work."

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THEY got to work. They spent the whole day at it. They mapped out the various sales approaches. They picked the villages where each one would be tried. Sheridan divided the robots into teams and assigned a team to each project. They worked out every detail. They left not a thing to chance.

Sheridan sat down to his supper table with the feeling that they had it made — if one of the approaches didn't work, another surely would. The trouble was that, as he saw it, they had done no planning. They had been so sure that this was an easy one that they had plunged ahead into straight selling without any thought upon the matter.

In the morning, the robots went out, full of confidence.

Abraham's crew had been assigned to a house-to-house campaign and they worked hard and conscientiously. They didn't miss a single house in the entire village. At every house, the answer had been no. Sometimes it was a firm but simple no; sometimes it was a door slammed in the face; at other times, it was a plea of poverty.

One thing was plain: Individual Garsonians could be cracked no more readily than Garsonians en masse.

Gideon and his crew tried the sample racket — handing out gift samples door to door with the understanding they would be back again to display their wares. The Garsonian householders weren't having any. They refused to take the samples.

Lemuel headed up the lottery project. A lottery, its proponents argued, appealed to basic greed. And this lottery had been rigged to carry maximum appeal. The price was as low as it could be set — one *podar* for a ticket. The list of prizes offered was just this side of fabulous. But the Garsonians, as it appeared, were not a greedy people. Not a ticket was sold.

And the funny thing about it— the unreasonable, maddening, impossible thing about it — was that the Garsonians seemed tempted.

"You could see them fighting it," Abraham reported at the conference that night. "You could see they wanted something we had for sale, but they'd steel themselves against it and they never weakened."

"We may have them on the very edge," said Lemuel. "Maybe just a little push is all it will take. Do you suppose we could start a whispering campaign? Maybe we could get it rumored that some other villages are buying right and left. That should weaken the resistance."

But Ebenezer was doubtful. "We have to dig down to causes. We

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have to find out what is behind this buyers' strike. It may be a very simple thing. If we only knew . . ."

EBENEZER took out a team to a distant village. They hauled along with them a pre-fabricated supermarket, which they set up in the village square. They racked their wares attractively. They loaded the place with glamor and excitement. They installed loudspeakers all over town to bellow out their bargains.

Abraham and Gideon headed up two talking-billboard crews. They ranged far and wide, setting up their billboards, splashed with attractive color, and installing propaganda tapes.

Sheridan had transmogged Oliver and Silas into semantics experts and they had engineered the tapes — a careful, skillful job. They did not bear down too blatantly on the commercial angle, although it certainly was there. The tapes were cuddly in spots and candid in others. At all times, they rang with deep sincerity. They sang the praises of the Garsonians for the decent, upstanding folks they were; they preached pithy homilies on honesty and fairness and the keeping of contracts; they presented the visitors as a sort of cross between public benefactors and addle-pated nitwits who could easily be outsmarted.

The tapes ran day and night. They pelted the defenseless Garsonians with a smooth, sleek advertising — and the effects should have been devastating, since the Garsonians were entirely unfamiliar with any kind of advertising.

Lemuel stayed behind at base and tramped up and down the beach, with his hands clenched behind his back, thinking furiously. At times he stopped his pacing long enough to scribble frantic notes, jotting down ideas.

Lemuel was trying to arrive at some adaptation of an old sales gag that he felt sure would work if he could only get it figured out — the ancient I-am-working-my-way-through-college wheeze.

Joshua and Thaddeus came to Sheridan for a pair of playwright transmogs. Sheridan said they had none, but Hezekiah, forever optimistic, ferreted into the bottom of the transmog chest. He came up with one transmog labeled auctioneer and another public speaker. They were the closest he could find.

Disgusted, the two rejected them and retired into seclusion, working desperately and as best they could on a medicine show routine.

For example, how did one write jokes for an alien people? What would they regard as funny? The off-color joke — oh, very fine, except that one would have to know in some detail the sexual life of

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the people it was aimed at. The mother-in-law joke — once again one would have to know; there were a lot of places where mothers-in-law were held in high regard, and other places where it was bad taste to even mention them. The dialect routine, of course, was strictly out, as it well deserved to be. Also, so far as the Garsonians were concerned, was the business slicker joke. The Garsonians were no commercial people; such a joke would sail clear above their heads.

BUT Joshua and Thaddeus, for all of that, were relatively undaunted. They requisitioned the files of data from Sheridan and spent hours poring over them, analyzing the various aspects of Garsonian life that might be safely written into their material. They made piles of notes. They drafted intricate charts showing relationships of Garsonian words and the maze of native social life. They wrote and rewrote and revised and polished. Eventually, they hammered out their script.

"There's nothing like a show," Joshua told Sheridan with conviction, "to loosen up a people. You get them feeling good and they lose their inhibitions. Besides, you have made them become somewhat indebted to you. You have entertained them and naturally they must feel the need to reciprocate."

"I hope it works," said Sheridan, somewhat doubtful and discouraged.

For nothing else was working.

In the distant village, the Garsonians had unbent sufficiently to visit the supermarket — to visit, not to buy. It almost seemed as if to them the market was some great museum or showplace. They would file down the aisles and goggle at the merchandise and at times reach out and touch it, but they didn't buy. They were, in fact, insulted if one suggested perhaps they'd like to buy.

In the other villages, the billboards had at first attracted wide attention. Crowds had gathered around them and had listened by the hour. But the novelty had worn off by now and they paid the tapes very little attention. And they still continued to ignore the robots. Even more pointedly, they ignored or rebuffed all attempts to sell.

It was disheartening.

Lemuel gave up his pacing and threw away his notes. He admitted he was licked. There was no way, on Garson IV, to adapt the idea of the college salesman.

Baldwin headed up a team that tried to get the whisper campaign started. The natives flatly disbelieved that any other village would go out and buy.

There remained the medicine show and Joshua and Thaddeus

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had a troupe rehearsing. The project was somewhat hampered by the fact that even Hezekiah could not dig up any actor transmogs, but, even so, they were doing well.

Despite the failure of everything they had tried, the robots kept going out to the villages, kept plugging away, kept on trying to sell, hoping that one day they would get a clue, a hint, an indication that might help them break the shell of reserve and obstinacy set up by the natives.

One day Gideon, out alone, radioed to base.

"There's something out here underneath a tree that you should take a look at," he told Sheridan.

"Something?"

"A different kind of being. It looks intelligent."

"A Garsonian?"

"Humanoid, all right, but it's no Garsonian."

"I'll be right out," said Sheridan. "You stay there so you can point it out to me."

"It has probably seen me," Gideon said, "but I did not approach it. I thought you might like first whack at it yourself."

AS Gideon had said, the creature was sitting underneath a tree. It had a glittering cloth spread out and an ornate jug set out and was taking things out of a receptacle that probably was a hamper.

It was more attractively humanoid than the Garsonians. Its features were finely chiseled and its body had a look of lithe ranginess. It was dressed in the richest fabrics and was all decked out with jewels. It had a decided social air about it.

"Hello, friend," Sheridan said in Garsonian.

The creature seemed to understand him, but it smiled in a superior manner and seemed not to be too happy at Sheridan's intrusion.

"Perhaps," it finally said, "you have the time to sit down for a while."

Which, the way that was put, was a plain and simple invitation for Sheridan to say no, he was sorry, but he hadn't and he must be getting on.

"Why, certainly," said Sheridan. "Thank you very much."

He sat down and watched the creature continue to extract things from the hamper.

"It's slightly difficult," the creature told him, "for us to communicate in this barbaric language. But I suppose it's the best we can do. You do not happen to know Ballic, do you?"

"I'm sorry," said Sheridan. "I've never heard of it."

"I had thought you might. It is widely used."

"We can get along," said Sheridan quietly, "with the language native to this planet."

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"Oh, certainly," agreed the creature. "I presume I'm not trespassing. If I am, of course—"

"Not at all. I'm glad to find you here."

"I would offer you some food, but I hesitate to do so. Your metabolism undoubtedly is not the same as mine. It should pain me to poison you."

Sheridan nodded to indicate his gratitude. The food indeed was tempting. All of it was packaged attractively and some of it looked so delectable that it set the mouth to watering.

"I often come here for . . ." The creature hunted for the Garsonian word and there wasn't any.

Sheridan tried to help him out. "I think in my language I would call it picnic."

"An eating-out-of-doors," the stranger said. "That is the nearest I can come in the language of our host."

"We have the same idea."

The creature brightened up considerably at this evidence of mutual understanding. "I think, my friend, that we have much in common. Perhaps I could leave some of this food with you and you could analyze it. Then the next time I come, you could join me."

SHERIDAN shook his head. "I doubt I'll stay much longer."

"Oh," the stranger said, and he seemed pleased at it. "So you're a transitory being, too. Wings passing in the night. One hears a rustle and then the sound is gone forever."

"A most poetic thought," said Sheridan, "and a most descriptive one."

"Although," the creature said, "I come here fairly often. I've grown to love this planet. It is such a fine spot for an eating-out-of-doors. So restful and simple and unhurried. It is not cluttered up with activity and the people are so genuine, albeit somewhat dirty and very, very stupid. But I find it in my heart to love them for their lack of sophistication and their closeness to the soil and the clear-eyed view of life and their uncomplicated living of that life."

He halted his talk and cocked an eye at Sheridan.

"Don't you find it so, my friend?"

"Yes, of course I do," agreed Sheridan, rather hurriedly.

"There are so few places in the Galaxy," mourned the stranger, "where one can be alone in comfort. Oh, I do not mean alone entirely, or even physically. But an aloneness in the sense that there is space to live, that one is not pushed about by boundless, blind ambitions or smothered by the impact of other personalities. There are, of course, the lonely planets which are lonely only by the virtue of their being impossible for one

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to exist upon. These we must rule out."

He ate a little, daintily, and in a mincing manner. But he took a healthy snort from the ornate jug.

"This is excellent," said the creature, holding out the jug. "You are sure you do not want to chance it?"

"I think I'd better not."

"I suppose it's wise of you," the stranger admitted. "Life is not a thing that a person parts from without due consideration."

He had another drink, then put the jug down in his lap and sat there fondling it.

"Not that I am one," he said, "to extoll the virtue of living above all other things. Surely there must be other facets of the universal pattern that have as much to offer . . . "

They spent a pleasant afternoon together.

When Sheridan went back to the flier, the creature had finished off the jug and was sprawled, happily pickled, among the litter of the picnic.

IV

GRASPING at straws, Sheridan tried to fit the picnicking alien into the pattern, but there was no place where he'd fit.

Perhaps, after all, he was no more than what he seemed — a flitting dilettante with a passion for a lonely eating-out-of-doors and an addiction to the bottle.

Yet he knew the native language and he had said he came here often and that in itself was more than merely strange. With apparently the entire Galaxy in which to flit around, why should he gravitate to Garson IV, which, to the human eye, at least, was a most unprepossessing planet?

And another thing — how had he gotten here?

"Gideon," asked Sheridan, "did you see, by any chance, any sort of conveyance parked nearby that our friend could have traveled in?"

Gideon shook his head. "Now that you mention it, I am sure there wasn't. I would have noticed it."

"Has it occurred to you, sir," inquired Hezekiah, "that he may have mastered the ability of teleportation? It is not impossible. There was that race out on Pilico . . ."

"That's right," said Sheridan, "but the Pilicoans were good for no more than a mile or so at a time. You remember how they went popping along, like a jack rabbit making mile-long jumps, but making them so fast that you couldn't see him jump. This gent must have covered light-years. He asked me about a language that I never heard of. Indicated that it is widely spoken in at least some parts of the Galaxy."

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"You are worrying yourself unduly, sir," cautioned Hezekiah. "We have more important things than this galivanting alien to trouble ourselves about."

"You're right," said Sheridan. "If we don't get this cargo moving, it will be my neck."

But he couldn't shake entirely the memory of the afternoon.

He went back, in his mind, through the long and idle chatter and found, to his amazement, that it had been completely idle. So far as he could recall, the creature had told him nothing of itself. For three solid hours or more, it had talked almost continuously and in all that time had somehow managed to say exactly nothing.

That evening, when he brought the supper, Napoleon squatted down beside the chair, gathering his spotless apron neatly in his lap.

"We are in a bad way, aren't we?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose you could say we are."

"What will we do, Steve, if we can't move the stuff at all — if we can't get any *podars?*"

"Nappy," said Sheridan, "I've been trying very hard not to think of it."

But now that Napoleon had brought it up, he could well imagine the reaction of Central Trading if he should have to haul a billion-dollar cargo back intact. He could imagine, a bit more vividly, what might be said to him if he simply left it here and went back home without it.

No matter how he did it, he had to sell the cargo!

If he didn't, his career was in a sling.

Although there was more, he realized, than just his career at stake. The whole human race was involved.

THERE was a real and pressing need for the tranquilizer made from *podar* tubers. A search for such a drug had started centuries before and the need of it was underlined by the fact that through all those centuries the search had never faltered. It was something that Man needed badly — that Man, in fact, had needed badly since the very moment he'd become something more than animal.

And here, on this very planet, was the answer to that terrible human need — an answer denied and blocked by the stubbornness of a shiftless, dirty, backward people.

"If we only had this planet," he said, speaking more to himself than to Napoleon, "if we could only take it over, we could grow all the *podars* that we needed. We'd make it one big field and we'd grow a thousand times more *podars* than these natives ever grew."

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"But we can't," Napoleon said. "It is against the law."

"Yes, Nappy, you are right. Very much against the law."

For the Garsonians were intelligent — not startingly so, but intelligent, at least, within the meaning of the law.

And you could do nothing that even hinted of force against an intelligent race. You couldn't even buy or lease their land, for the law would rule that in buying one would be dispossessing them of the inalienable rights of all alien intelligences.

You could work with them and teach them — that was very laudable. But the Garsonians were almost unteachable. You could barter with them if you were very careful that you did not cheat them too outrageously. But the Garsonians refused to barter.

"I don't know what we'll do," Sheridan told Napoleon. "How are we going to find a way?"

"I have a sort of suggestion. If we could introduce these natives to the intricacies of dice, we might finally get somewhere. We robots, as you probably know, are very good at it."

Sheridan choked on his coffee. He slowly and with great care set the cup down.

"Ordinarily," he told Napoleon solemnly, "I would frown upon such tactics. But with the situation as it stands, why don't you get some of the boys together and have a try at it?"

"Glad to do it, Steve."

"And . . . uh, Nappy . . ."

"Yes, Steve?"

"I presume you'd pick the best crap-shooters in the bunch."

"Naturally," said Napoleon, getting up and smoothing his apron.

JOSHUA and Thaddeus took their troupe to a distant village in entirely virgin territory, untouched by any of the earlier selling efforts, and put on the medicine show.

It was an unparalleled success. The natives rolled upon the ground, clutching at their bellies, helpless with laughter. They howled and gasped and wiped their streaming eyes. They pounded one another on the back in appreciation of the jokes. They'd never seen anything like it in all their lives — there had never been anything like it on all of Garson IV.

And while they were weak with merriment, while they were still well-pleased, at the exact psychological moment when all their inhibitions should be down and all stubbornness and hostility be stilled, Joshua made the sales pitch.

The laughter stopped. The merriment went away. The audience simply stood and stared.

The troupe packed up and came trailing home, deep in despondency.

Sheridan sat in his tent and

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faced the bleak prospect. Outside the tent, the base was still as death. There was no happy talk or singing and no passing laughter. There was no neighborly tramping back and forth.

"Six weeks," Sheridan said bitterly to Hezekiah. "Six weeks and not a sale. We've done everything we can and we've not come even close."

He clenched his fist and hit the desk. "If we could only find what the trouble is! They want our merchandise and still they refuse to buy. What is the holdup, Hezekiah? Can you think of anything?"

Hezekiah shook his head. "Nothing, sir. I'm stumped. We all are."

"They'll crucify me back at Central," Sheridan declared. "They'll nail me up and keep me as a horrible example for the next ten thousand years. There've been failures before, but none like this."

"I hesitate to say this, sir," said Hezekiah, "but we could take it on the lam. Maybe that's the answer. The boys would go along. Theoretically they're loyal to Central, but deep down at the bottom of it, it's you they're really loyal to. We could load up the cargo and that would give us capital and we'd have a good head start . . ."

"No," Sheridan said firmly. "We'll try a little longer and we may solve the situation. If not, I face the music."

He scraped his hand across his jaw.

"Maybe," he said, "Nappy and his crap-shooters can turn the trick for us. It's fantastic, sure, but stranger things have happened."

NAPOLEON and his pals came back, sheepish and depressed.

"They beat the pants off us," the cook told Sheridan in awe. "Those boys are really naturals. But when we tried to pay our bets, they wouldn't take our stuff!"

"We have to try to arrange a powwow," said Sheridan, "and talk it out with them, although I hold little hope for it. Do you think, Napoleon, if we came clean and told them what a spot we're in, it would make a difference?"

"No, I don't," Napoleon said.

"If they only had a government," observed Ebenezer, who had been a member of Napoleon's gambling team, "we might get somewhere with a powwow. Then you could talk with someone who represented the entire population. But this way you'll have to talk with each village separately and that will take forever."

"We can't help it, Eb," said Sheridan. "It's all we have left."

But before any powwow could be arranged, the *podar* harvest started. The natives toiled like beavers in the fields, digging up the tubers, stacking them to dry, packing them in carts and hauling

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them to the barns by sheer manpower, for the Garsonians had no draft animals.

They dug them up and hauled them to the barns, the very barns where they'd sworn that they had no *podars*. But that was not to wonder at when one stopped to think of it, for the natives had also sworn that they grew no *podars*.

They did not open the big barn doors, as one would have normally expected them to do. They simply opened a tiny, man-size door set into the bigger door and took the *podars* in that way. And when any of the Earth party hove in sight, they quickly stationed a heavy guard around the entire square.

"We'd better let them be," Abraham advised Sheridan. "If we try to push them, we may have trouble in our lap."

So the robots pulled back to the base and waited for the harvest to end. Finally it was finished and Sheridan counseled lying low for a few days more to give the Garsonians a chance to settle back to their normal routine.

Then they went out again and this time Sheridan rode along, on one of the floaters with Abraham and Gideon.

The first village they came to lay quiet and lazy in the sun. There was not a creature stirring.

Abraham brought the floater down into the square and the three stepped off.

The square was empty and the place was silent — a deep and deathly silence.

SHERIDAN felt the skin crawling up his back, for there was a stealthy, unnatural menace in the noiseless emptiness.

"They may be laying for us," suggested Gideon.

"I don't think so," said Abraham. "Basically they are peaceful."

They moved cautiously across the square and walked slowly down a street that opened from the square.

And still there was no living thing in sight.

And stranger still — the doors of some of the houses stood open to the weather and the windows seemed to watch them out of blind eyes, with the colorful crude curtains gone.

"Perhaps," Gideon suggested, "they may have gone away to some harvest festival or something of that nature."

"They wouldn't leave their doors wide open, even for a day," declared Abraham. "I've lived with them for weeks and I've studied them. I know what they would do. They'd have closed the doors very carefully and tried them to be sure that they were closed."

"But maybe the wind . . ."

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"Not a chance," insisted Abraham. "One door, possibly. But I see four of them from here."

"Someone has to take a look," said Sheridan. "It might as well be me."

He turned in at a gate where one of the doors stood open and went slowly up the path. He halted at the threshold and peered in. The room beyond was empty. He stepped into the house and went from room to room and all the rooms were empty — not simply of the natives, but of everything. There was no furniture and the utensils and the tools were gone from hooks and racks. There was no scrap of clothing. There was nothing left behind. The house was dead and bare and empty, a shabby and abandoned thing discarded by its people.

He felt a sense of guilt creep into his soul. What if we drove them off? What if we hounded them until they'd rather flee than face us?

But that was ridiculous, he told himself. There must be some other reason for this incredibly complete mass exodus.

He went back down the walk. Abraham and Gideon went into other houses. All of them were empty.

"It may be this village only," suggested Gideon. "The rest may be quite normal."

But Gideon was wrong.

BACK at the floater, they got in touch with base.

"I can't understand it," said Hezekiah. "I've had the same report from four other teams. I was about to call you, sir."

"You'd better get out every floater that you can," said Sheridan. "Check all the villages around. And keep a lookout for the people. They may be somewhere in the country. There's a possibility they're at a harvest festival."

"If they're at a festival, sir," asked Hezekiah, "why did they take their belongings? You don't take along your furniture when you attend a festival."

"I know," said Sheridan. "You put your finger on it. Get the boys out, will you?"

"There's just the possibility," Gideon offered, "that they are changing villages. Maybe there's a tribal law that says they have to build a new village every so often. It might have its roots in an ancient sanitation law that the camp must be moved at stated intervals."

"It could be that," Sheridan said wearily. "We'll have to wait and see."

Abraham thumbed a fist toward the barn.

Sheridan hesitated, then threw caution to the winds.

"Go ahead," he said.

Gideon stalked up the ramp and reached the door. He put out a hand and grasped one of the

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planks nailed across the door. He wrenched and there was an anguished shriek of tortured nails ripping from the wood and the board came free. Another plank came off and then another one and Gideon put his shoulder to the door and half of it swung open.

Inside, in the dimness of the barn, was the dull, massive shine of metal — a vast machine sitting on the driveway floor.

Sheridan stiffened with a cold, hollow sense of terror.

It was wrong, he thought. There could be no machine.

The Garsonians had no business having a machine. Their culture was entirely non-mechanical. The best they had achieved so far had been the hoe and wheel, and even yet they had not been able to put the hoe and wheel together to make themselves a plow.

They had had no machine when the second expedition left some fifteen years ago, and in those fifteen years they could not have spanned the gap. In those fifteen years, from all surface indications, they had not advanced an inch.

And yet the machine stood in the driveway of the barn.

It was a fair-sized cylinder, set on end and with a door in one side of it. The upper end of it terminated in a dome-shaped cap. Except for the door, it resembled very much a huge and snub-nosed bullet.

Interference, thought Sheridan. There had been someone here between the time the second expedition left and the third one had arrived.

"Gideon," he said.

"What is it, Steve?"

"Go back to base and bring the transmog chest. Tell Hezekiah to get my tent and all the other stuff over here as soon as he is able. Call some of the boys off reconnaissance. We have work to do."

There had been someone here, he thought — and most certainly there had. A very urbane creature who sat beneath a tree beside a spread-out picnic cloth, swigging at his jug and talking for three solid hours without saying anything at all!

V

THE messenger from Central Trading brought his small ship down to one side of the village square, not far from where Sheridan's tent was pitched. He slid back the visi-dome and climbed out of his seat.

He stood for a moment, shining in the sun, during which he straightened his SPECIAL COURIER badge, which had become askew upon his metal chest. Then he walked deliberately toward the barn, heading for Sheridan, who sat upon the ramp.

"You are Sheridan?" he asked.

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Sheridan nodded, looking him over. He was a splendid thing.

"I had trouble finding you. Your base seems to be deserted."

"We ran into some difficulty," Sheridan said quietly.

"Not too serious, I trust. I see your cargo is untouched."

"Let me put it this way — we haven't been bored."

"I see," the robot said, disappointed that an explanation was not immediately forthcoming. "My name is Tobias and I have a message for you."

"I'm listening."

SOMETIMES, Sheridan told himself, these headquarters robots needed taking down a peg or two.

"It is a verbal message. I can assure you that I am thoroughly briefed. I can answer any questions you may wish to ask."

"Please," said Sheridan. "The message first."

"Central Trading wishes to inform you that they have been offered the drug calenthropodensia in virtually unlimited supply by a firm which describes itself as Galactic Enterprises. We would like to know if you can shed any light upon the matter."

"Galactic Enterprises," said Sheridan. "I've never heard of them."

"Neither has Central Trading. I don't mind telling you that we're considerably upset."

"I should imagine you would be."

Tobias squared his shoulders. "I have been instructed to point out to you that you were sent to Garson IV to obtain a cargo of *podars*, from which this drug is made, and that the assignment, in view of the preliminary work already done upon the planet, should not have been so difficult that — "

"Now, now," cautioned Sheridan, "Let us keep our shirts on. If it will quiet your conscience any, you may consider for the record that I have accepted the bawling out you're supposed to give me."

"But you — "

"I assume," said Sheridan, "that Galactic Enterprises is quoting a good stiff price on this drug of theirs."

"It's highway robbery. What Central Trading has sent me to find out—"

"Is whether I am going to bring in a cargo of *podars*. At the moment, I can't tell you."

"But I must take back my report!"

"Not right now, you aren't. I won't be able to make a report to you for several days at least. You'll have to wait."

"But my instructions are—"

"Suit yourself," Sheridan said sharply. "Wait for it or go back without it. I don't give a damn which you do."

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HE got up from the ramp and walked into the barn.

The robots, he saw, had finally pried or otherwise dislodged the cap from the big machine and had it on the side on the driveway floor, tilted to reveal the innards of it.

"Steve," said Abraham bitterly, "take a look at it."

Sheridan took a look. The inside of the cap was a mass of fused metal.

"There were some working parts in there," said Gideon, "but they have been destroyed."

Sheridan scratched his head. "Deliberately? A self-destruction relay?"

Abraham nodded. "They apparently were all finished with it. If we hadn't been here, I suppose they would have carted this machine and the rest of them back home, wherever that may be. But they couldn't take a chance of one of them falling in our hands. So they pressed the button or whatever they had to do and the entire works went pouf."

"But there are other machines. Apparently one in every barn."

"Probably just the same as this," said Lemuel, rising from his knees beside the cap.

"What's your guess?" asked Sheridan.

"A matter transference machine, a teleporter, whatever you want to call it," Abraham told him. "Not deduced, of course, from anything in the machine itself, but from the circumstances. Look at this barn. There's not a *podar* in it. Those *podars* went somewhere. This picnicking friend of yours—"

"They call themselves," said Sheridan, "Galactic Enterprises. A messenger just arrived. He says they offered Central Trading a deal on the *podar* drug."

"And now Central Trading," Abraham supplied, "enormously embarrassed and financially outraged, will pin the blame on us because we've delivered not a *podar*."

"I have no doubt of it," said Sheridan. "It all depends upon whether or not we can locate these native friends of ours."

"I would think that most unlikely," Gideon said. "Our reconnaissance showed all the villages empty throughout the entire planet. Do you suppose they might have left in these machines? If they'd transport *podars*, they'd probably transport people."

"Perhaps," said Lemuel, making a feeble joke, "everything that begins with the letter *p*."

"What are the chances of finding how they work?" asked Sheridan. "This is something that Central could make a lot of use of."

ABRAHAM shook his head. "I can't tell you, Steve. Out of all these machines on the planet, which amounts to one in every

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barn, there is a certain mathematical chance that we might find one that was not destroyed."

"But even if we did," said Gideon, "there is an excellent chance that it would immediately destroy itself if we tried to tamper with it."

"And if we don't find one that is not destroyed?"

"There is a chance," Lemuel admitted. "All of them would not destroy themselves to the same degree, of course. Nor would the pattern of destruction always be the same. From, say, a thousand of them, you might be able to work out a good idea of what kind of machinery there was in the cone."

"And say we could find out what kind of machinery was there?"

"That's a hard one to answer, Steve," Abraham said. "Even if we had one complete and functioning, I honestly don't know if we could ferret out the principle to the point where we could duplicate it. You must remember that at no time has the human race come even close to something of this nature."

It made a withering sort of sense to Sheridan. Seeing a totally unfamiliar device work, even having it blueprinted in exact detail, would convey nothing whatever if the theoretical basis was missing. It was, completely, and there was a great deal less available here than a blueprint or even working model.

"They used those machines to transport the *podars*," he said, "and possibly to transport the people. And if that is true, it must be the people went voluntarily — we'd have known if there was force involved. Abe, can you tell me: Why would the people go?"

"I wouldn't know," said Abraham. "All I have now is a physicist transmog. Give me one on sociology and I'll wrestle with the problem."

There was a shout outside the barn and they whirled toward the door. Ebenezer was coming up the ramp and in his arms he carried a tiny, dangling form.

"It's one of them," gasped Gideon. "It's a native, sure enough!"

Ebenezer knelt and placed the little native tenderly on the floor. "I found him in the field. He was lying in a ditch. I'm afraid he's done for."

Sheridan stepped forward and bent above the native. It was an old man — any one of the thousands of old men he'd seen in the villages. The same leathery old face with the wind and weather wrinkles in it, the same shaggy brows shielding deep-sunk eyes, the same scraggly crop of whiskers, the same sense of forgotten shiftlessness and driven stubbornness.

"Left behind," said Ebenezer. "Left behind when all the others

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went. He must have fallen sick out in the field . . . "

"Get my canteen," Sheridan said. "It's hanging by the door."

THE oldster opened his eyes and glanced around the circle of faces that stared down at him. He rubbed a hand across his face, leaving streaks of dirt.

"I fell," he mumbled. "I remember falling. I fell into a ditch."

"Here's the water, Steve," said Abraham.

Sheridan took it, lifted the old man and held him half upright against his chest. He tilted the canteen to the native's lips. The oldster drank unneatly, gulping at the water. Some of it spilled, splashing down his whiskers to drip onto his belly.

Sheridan took the canteen away.

"Thank you," the native said and, Sheridan reflected, that was the first civil word to come their way from any of the natives.

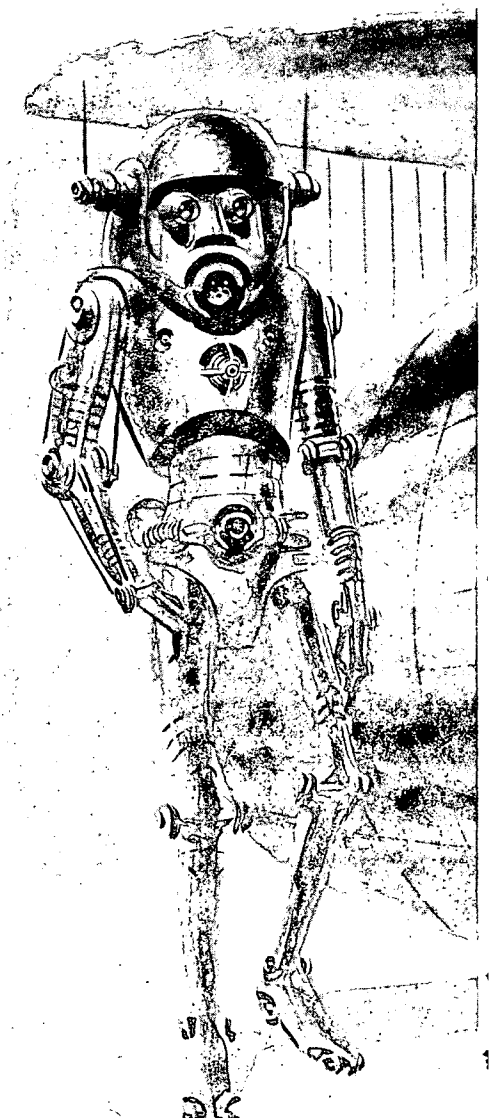
The native rubbed his face again with a dirty claw. "The people all are gone?"

"All gone," said Sheridan.

"Too late," the old man said. "I would have made it if I hadn't fallen down. Perhaps they hunted for me . . . " His voice trailed off into nothingness.

"If you don't mind, sir," suggested Hezekiah, "I'll get a medic transmog."

"Perhaps you should," said



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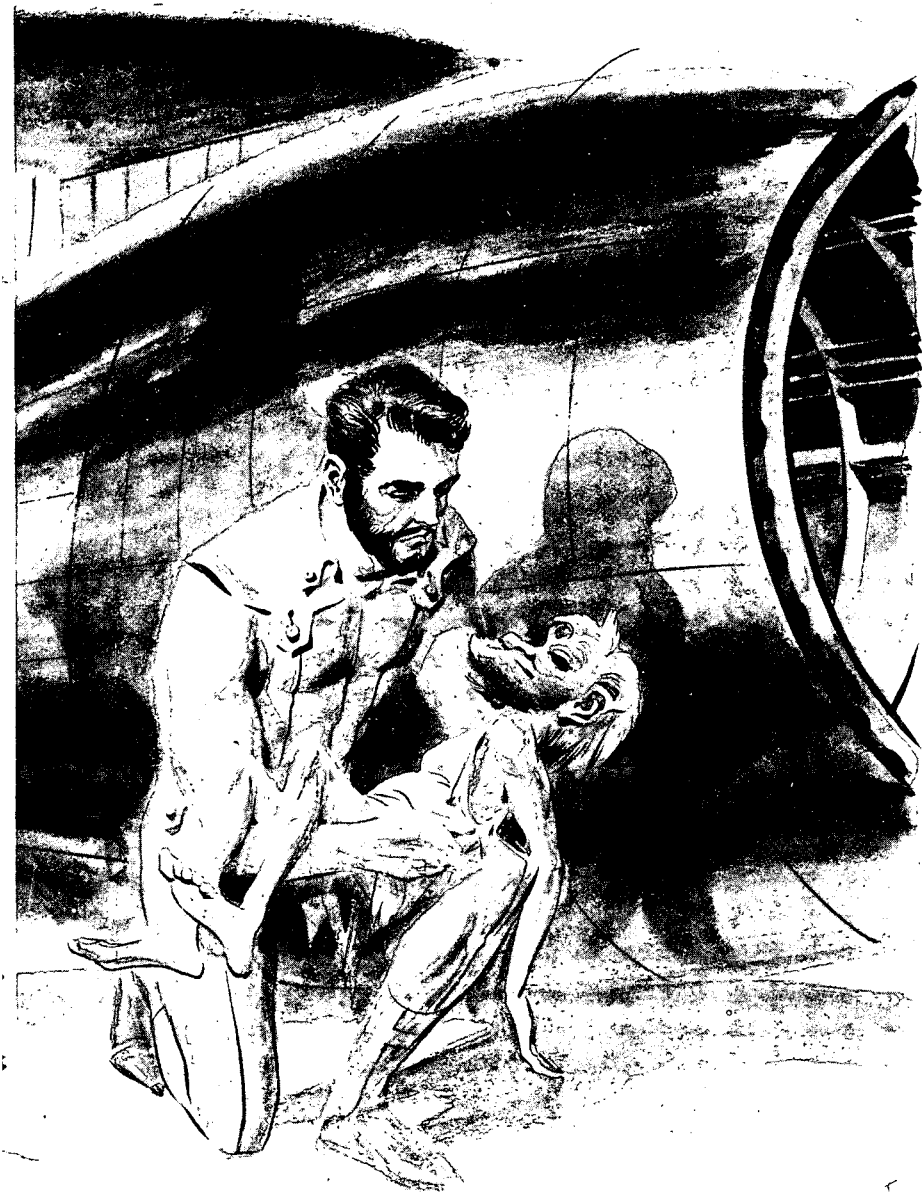

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Sheridan. "Although I doubt it'll do much good. He should have died days ago out there in the field."

"Steve," said Gideon, speaking softly, "a human doctor isn't too much use treating alien people. In time, if we had the time, we could find out about this fellow — something about his body chemistry and his metabolism. Then we could doctor him."

"That's right, Steve," Abraham said.

Sheridan shrugged. "All right then, Hezekiah. Forget about the transmog."

He laid the old man back on the floor again and got up off his knees. He sat on his heels and rocked slowly back and forth.

"Perhaps," he said to the native, "you'll answer one question. Where did all your people go?"

"In there," the native said, raising a feeble arm to point at the machine. "In there, and then they went away just as the harvest we gathered did."

Sheridan stayed squatting on the floor beside the stricken native.

Reuben brought in an armload of grass and wadded it beneath the native's head as a sort of pillow.

SO the Garsonians had really gone away, Sheridan told himself, had up and left the planet. Had left it, using the machines that had been used to make delivery of the *podars*. And if Galactic Enterprises had machines like that, then they (whoever, wherever they might be) had a tremendous edge on Central Trading. For Central Trading's lumbering cargo sleds, snaking their laborious way across the light-years, could offer only feeble competition to machines like those.

He had thought, he remembered, the first day they had landed, that a little competition was exactly what Central Trading needed. And here was that competition — a competition that had not a hint of ethics. A competition that sneaked in behind Central Trading's back and grabbed the market that Central Trading needed — the market that Central could have cinched if it had not fooled around, if it had not been so sly and cynical about adapting the *podar* crop to Earth.

Just where and how, he wondered, had Galactic Enterprises found out about the *podars* and the importance of the drug? Under what circumstances had they learned the exact time limit during which they could operate in the *podar* market without Central interference? And had they, perhaps, been slightly optimistic in regard to that time limit and gotten caught in a situation where they had been forced to destroy all those beautiful machines?

Sheridan chuckled quietly to

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himself. That destruction must have hurt them!

It wasn't hard, however, to imagine a hundred or a thousand ways in which they might have learned about the *podar* situation, for they were a charming people and really quite disarming. He would not be surprised if some of them might be operating secretly inside of Central Trading.

The native stirred. He reached out a skinny hand and tugged at the sleeve of Sheridan's jacket.

"Yes, what is it, friend?"

"You will stay with me?" the native begged. "These others here, they are not the same as you and I."

"I will stay with you," Sheridan promised.

"I think we'd better go," said Gideon. "Maybe we disturb him."

The robots walked quietly from the barn and left the two alone.

REACHING out, Sheridan put a hand on the native's brow. The flesh was clammy cold.

"Old friend," he said, "I think perhaps you owe me something."

The old man shook his head, rolling it slowly back and forth upon the pillow. And the fierce light of stubbornness and a certain slyness came into his eyes.

"We don't owe you," he said. "We owed the other ones."

And that, of course, hadn't been what Sheridan had meant.

But there they lay — the words that told the story, the solution to the puzzle that was Garson IV.

"That was why you wouldn't trade with us," said Sheridan, talking to himself rather than to the old native on the floor. "You were so deep in debt to these other people that you needed all the *podars* to pay off what you owed them?"

And that must have been the way it was. Now that he thought back on it, that supplied the one logical explanation for everything that happened. The reaction of the natives, the almost desperate sales resistance was exactly the kind of thing one would expect from people in debt up to their ears.

That was the reason, too, the houses had been so neglected and the clothes had been in rags. It accounted for the change from the happy-go-lucky shiftlessness to the beaten and defeated and driven attitude. So pushed, so hounded, so fearful that they could not meet the payments on the debt that they strained their every resource, drove themselves to ever harder work, squezing from the soil every *podar* they could grow.

"That was it?" he demanded sharply. "That was the way it was?"

The native nodded with reluctance.

"They came along and offered such a bargain that you could not

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turn it down. For the machines, perhaps? For the machines to send you to other places?"

The native shook his head. "No, not the machines. We put the *podars* in the machines and the *podars* went away. That was how we paid."

"You were paying all these years?"

"That is right," the native said. Then he added, with a flash of pride: "But now we're all paid up."

"That is fine," said Sheridan. "It is good for a man to pay his debts."

"They took three years off the payments," said the native eagerly. "Was that not good of them?"

"I'm sure it was," said Sheridan, with some bitterness.

He squatted patiently on the floor, listening to the faint whisper of a wind blowing in the loft and the rasping breath of the dying native.

"But then your people used the machines to go away. Can't you tell me why?"

A racking cough shook the old man and his breath came in gasping sobs.

Sheridan felt a sense of shame in what he had to do. I should let him die in peace, he thought. I should not badger him. I should let him go in whatever dignity he can — not pushed and questioned to the final breath he draws.

But there was that last answer— the one Sheridan had to have.

SHERIDAN said gently: "But tell me, friend, what did you bargain for? What was it that you bought?"

He wondered if the native heard. There was no indication that he had.

"What did you buy?" Sheridan insisted.

"A planet," said the native.

"But you had a planet!"

"This one was different," the native told him in a feeble whisper. "This was a planet of immortality. Anyone who went there would never, never die."

Sheridan squatted stiffly in shocked and outraged silence.

And from the silence came a whisper — a whisper still of faith and belief and pity that would haunt the human all his life.

"That was what I lost," the whisper said. "That was what I lost . . ."

Sheridan opened his hands and closed them, strangling the perfect throat and the winning smile, shutting off the cultured flow of words.

If I had him now, he thought, if I only had him now!

He remembered the spead-out picnic cloth and the ornate jug and the appetizing food, the smooth, slick gab and the assurance of the creature. And even the methodical business of getting very drunk so that their meeting could end without unpleasant questions or undue suspicion.

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And the superior way in which he'd asked if the human might know Ballic, all the time, more than likely, being able to speak English himself.

So Central Trading finally had its competition. From this moment, Central Trading would be fighting with its back against the wall. For these jokers in Galactic Enterprises played dirty and for keeps.

The Garsonians had been naive fools, of course, but that was no true measure of Galactic Enterprises. They undoubtedly would select different kinds of bait for different kinds of fish, but the old never-never business of immortality might be deadly bait for even the most sophisticated if appropriately presented.

An utter lack of ethics and the transference machines were the trumps Galactic held.

WHAT had really happened, he wondered, to all the people who had lived on this planet? Where had they really gone when they followed the *podars* into those machines?

Could the Galactic boys, by chance, have ferreted out a place where there would be a market for several million slaves?

Or had they simply planned to get the Garsonians out of the way as an effective means of cutting off the *podar* supply for Central Trading, thus insuring a ready and profitable sale for their supply of drugs?

Or had they lured the Garsonians away so they themselves could take over the planet?

And if that was the case — perhaps in *any* case — Galactic Enterprises defintely had lost this first encounter. Maybe, Sheridan told himself, they are really not so hot.

They gave us exactly what we need, he realized with a pleased jolt. They did us a favor!

Old blundering, pompous Central Trading had won the first round, after all.

He got to his feet and headed for the door.

He hesitated and turned back to the native.

"Maybe, friend," he said, "you were the lucky one."

The native did not hear him.

Gideon was waiting at the door.

"How is he?" he asked.

"He's dead," Sheridan said. "I wonder if you'd arrange for burial."

"Of course," said Gideon. "You'll let me see the data. I'll have to bone up on the proper rites."

"But first do something else for me."

"Name it, Steve."

"You know this Tobias, the messenger that Central Trading sent? Find him and see that he doesn't leave."

Gideon grinned. "You may rest assured."

"Thank you," said Sheridan.

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On his way to the tent, he passed the courier's ship. It was, he noted, a job that was built for speed — little more than an instrument board and seat tacked onto a powerful engine.

In a ship like that, he thought, a pilot could really make some time.

Almost to the tent, he met Hezekiah.

"Come along with me," he said. "I have a job for you."

INSIDE the tent, he sat down in his chair and reached for a sheet of paper.

"Hezekiah," he said, "dig into that chest. Find the finest diplomatic transmog that we have."

"I know just where it is, sir," said Hezekiah, pawing through the chest.

He came out with the transmog and laid it on the desk.

"Hezekiah," said Sheridan, "listen to me carefully. Remember every word I say."

"Sir," replied Hezekiah, a little huffily, "I always listen carefully."

"I know you do. I have perfect faith and trust in you. That is why I'm sending you to Central."

"To Central, sir! You must be joking, surely. You know I cannot go. Sir, who would look after you? Who would see that you—"

"I can get along all right. You'll be coming back. And I'll still have Napoleon."

"But I don't want to go, sir!"

"Hezekiah, I must have someone I can trust. We'll put that transmog in you and—"

"But it will take me weeks, sir!"

"Not with the courier ship. You're going back instead of the courier. I'll write an authorization for you to represent me. It'll be as if I were there myself."

"But there is Abraham. Or Gideon. Or you could send any of the others . . ."

"It's you, Hezekiah. You are my oldest friend."

"Sir," said Hezekiah, straightening to attention, "what do you wish me to do?"

"You're to tell Central that Garson IV is now uninhabited. You're to say that such being the case, I'm possessing it formally in the name of Central Trading. Tell them I'll need reinforcements immediately because there is a possibility that Galactic Enterprises may try to take it from us. They're to send out one sled loaded with robots as an initial occupying and colonizing force, and another sledload of agricultural implements so we can start our farming. And every last *podar* that they have, for seed. And, Hezekiah . . ."

"Yes, sir?"

"That sledload of robots. They'd better be deactivated and knocked down. That way they can pile on more of them. We can assemble them here."

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Hezekiah repressed a shudder. "I will tell them, sir."

"I am sorry, Hezekiah."

"It is quite all right, sir."

Sheridan finished writing out the authorization.

"Tell Central Trading," he said, "that in time we'll turn this entire planet into one vast *podar* field. But they must not waste a minute. No committee sessions, no meetings of the board, no dawdling around. Keep right on their tail every blessed second."

"I will not let them rest, sir," Hezekiah assured him.

VI

THE courier ship had disappeared from sight. Try as he might, Sheridan could catch no further glimpse of it.

Good old Hezekiah, he thought, he'll do the job. Central Trading will be wondering for weeks exactly what it was that hit them.

He tilted his head forward and rubbed his aching neck.

He said to Gideon and Ebenezer: "You can get up off him now."

The two arose, grinning, from the prostrate form of Tobias.

Tobias got up, outraged. "You'll hear of this," he said to Sheridan.

"Yes, I know," said Sheridan. "You hate my guts."

Abraham stepped forward, "What is next?" he asked.

"Well," Sheridan said, "I think we should all turn gleaners."

"Gleaners?"

"There are bound to be some *podars* that the natives missed. We'll need every one we can find for seed."

"But we're all physicists and mechanical engineers and chemists and other things like that. Surely you would not expect such distinguished specialists—"

"I think I can remedy that," said Sheridan. "I imagine we still can find those spacehand transmogs. They should serve until Central sends us some farmer units."

Tobias stepped forward and ranged himself alongside of Abraham. "As long as I must remain here, I demand to be of use. It's not in a robot's nature just to loaf around."

Sheridan slapped his hand against his jacket pocket, felt the bulge of the transmog he'd taken out of Hezekiah.

"I think," he told Tobias, "I have just the thing for you."

— CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

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Pastoral Affair

By CHARLES A. STEARNS

No wonder Stefanik meant to fight to the last — he wasn't going to turn his kids over to an old goat like Glinka!

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

THE seaplane cast its silhouette from aloft upon the blue Arabian Sea, left its white wake across the shallows, and taxied alongside the ancient stone jetty, clawing into the sandy bottom with its small fore and after anchors.

Colonel Glinka stepped out upon the wing, carefully measured the distance to the jetty, and sprang for it, wetting himself up to the seat of his voluminous khaki shorts.

This lonely sandspit, these barren slopes and frowning, ocher cliffs, the oceanic silence around him, broken by the plaintive cries of wheeling Caspian terns that were badly in need of laundering, were not, he thought as he clambered ashore, exactly as one pictures a tropical paradise.

And it helped the desolation of his mood not at all that upon these same arid ridges scores of silent, burnoosed figures watched him as

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he stood there, allowing the water to drain from his perforated white oxfords and all unaware that his vast pith helmet, curiously heavy malacca cane and formidable fundament cast a centaur's shadow upon the rocks in the later afternoon sun.

Colonel Glinka took a pair of green sun goggles from his pocket and put them on, resolutely hitched up his shorts, assumed the stern yet conciliatory expression of a hedgehog in mating season, and set off up the rocky path.

Ahead of him, the burnoosed ones scrambled nimbly up the slope, looking over their shoulders, intent upon not missing a thing, yet endeavoring to keep their distance. But two there had been who either had not seen him arrive, or did not give a damn, for they suddenly appeared upon the rise before him, racing down toward the sea with very little regard for life or limb.

IN the lead, a brown young man in flying green turban and white duck trousers appeared to be losing steadily to his pursuer, who, though swathed from head to food in that featureless native garb of the others, might yet be identified by subtle conformations as a female.

Both of them stopped at once upon sighting Colonel Glinka in the pathway, the female hurriedly retreating to what might be deemed a safer distance, the young man standing as if petrified, with one foot upraised and a sun-snarl upon his mottled face, quivering at point.

"Oh, Effendi," he cried at last, "if you are looking for Aden, then you are lost, for Aden is five hundred miles that way. And if you are looking for Cairo —"

"I am hardly ever lost," Colonel Glinka said, and, eying the young female, added, "Tell me, what is the name of that rather tasteless game that you are playing?"

"No game, Effendi," the brown young man said. "That one chases me every time I go outside. They are worse than Tuaregs, these people."

"Are you not a native, then?"

"I?" The young man placed a hand of scorn upon his breast. "Hadji Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar? I am Saudi, and a Hadj besides. Say, Joe, have you got an American cigarette?"

"A great deal better than that," Colonel Glinka said, proffering an ornate golden cigarette case. "Try one of these, my boy."

Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar took two, sniffing them suspiciously. "They are very brown," he said.

Less critically, Colonel Glinka lighted one for himself. "You know," he said, "I was rather hoping that you might direct me to the house of a very old friend of mine."

"What handle?"

"I cannot tell you what name he is presently affecting, but he is a

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small, crooked man with a heavy black beard — or, at any rate, he once had such a beard. I know that he is somewhere on this island; therefore it will be useless for you to lie to me."

"Ah, that is the Sidi Doctor Stephens," Abdul said, puffing not too happily upon his cigarette. "His is the only house upon this island; also, I am his flunky and so I ought to know."

"'Stephens' will do," said Colonel Glinka, thwacking him smartly with the Malacca cane. "Lead on. And you may dispense with the gutter American dialect. I am not American, and besides I speak Arabic fluently."

"But I not so well," Abdul said, "for I was raised in the Kuwait oilfields."

"By whom? A camel breeder?"

"Socony Vacuum," Abdul said.

They toiled up the face of the cliff. At once, half a dozen of the white-robed gallery fell in behind them. When Colonel Glinka stopped and looked back, they stopped. When he continued upon his way, they continued.

"Have they no homes to which to go?" he complained. "Have they nothing to do?"

"They are a very backward people, who live in the open," Abdul said. "They do not work."

"How, then, do the wretches live? Wall Street charity, I presume."

"Oh, no, when they are not able to forage, the Sidi Doctor Stephens feeds them."

"The reactionary old fool! But you may be sure that they knew how to work in the old days, before he came."

"I do not think so."

"And why, in your ageless wisdom, not?"

"Because the Sidi Doctor made them," Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar said.

COLONEL Glinka did not reply, for they had reached the summit of the path by this time and were looking down upon a small, white villa that nestled in a green microcosm between the naked chines of the dark, interior hills. A miniature Eden indeed, thought Colonel Glinka, of figs and cinnamons, of date palms and patchouli, all enclosed within a high wire fence.

They descended, and Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar, with a flourish, produced a great bronze key and unlocked the iron gate. "The Sidi Doctor," he said, "will doubtless be in his conservatory, making flowers."

"A godlike pastime," said Colonel Glinka with heavy irony. "And where may this hotbed of new life be found?"

"Over there," Abdul said, pointing toward a narrow, screened, quonsetlike annex which protruded from the rear of the villa. "Come

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with me and I will show you."

"You will not," Colonel Glinka said, smiting him upon the thigh once again with the heavy cane. "You will remain here and keep silent."

"Ouchdammit!" Abdul exclaimed. "You be careful with that thing, Joe, okay?"

"*You* be careful, my boy," Colonel Glinka said and marched swiftly around the corner of the house, opened the screen door of the conservatory, and entered.

Here, amid long, terraced rows of tropical plants, a bearded dwarf in a green coat crouched before an earthen tray of lilies of the valley, tranquilly puffing up a massive, tobacco-stained meerschaum. He did not look up at the sound of the intruder, for he was engaged in a delicate business, the transfer of pollen from corolla to corolla with a toothpick.

"So you are, after all, only a minor god," Colonel Glinka said.

"I heard your plane and I watched you come up the path," the black bearded little man said. "Glinka, is it not?"

"You remembered me!" Colonel Glinka, quite affectedly, removed his goggles and dabbed at his eye with a perfumed handkerchief. "A humble policeman, a fat little nobody, to be remembered by the great Dr. Stefanik who was once our greatest scientist — yes, our most brilliant geneticist — do not shake your head. Let me see, was it Ankara where last we met? Yes, eight years ago in Ankara. You got away from me in Ankara. I was so ashamed, Comrade, that I cried."

"Nine years," the other corrected. "For one remembers a mad dog. And do not call me 'comrade,' Comrade. You know that I was never anything other than a simple Cossack."

"And, as such, invariably troublesome to us," Colonel Glinka said. "Yet you were our white hope, Comrade Stefanik. We might have led the world, I am told, in organics as we now lead in physics. I have read all of your books upon the fascinating subject of chromosomic change and the morphology of rats. It was required reading for those of us who were assigned to you. Most interesting, though I confess I did not understand all of it."

DR. STEFANIK got slowly to his feet. His back was now revealed to be so cruelly deformed that his black beard curled against his smock, and he walked with a shuffling, crablike motion as he limped over to pick up a small rubber irrigation hose.

"Why did you leave us, Comrade Stefanik?" asked Colonel Glinka. "Why shame us, discredit your government, by running away?"

"I did not like it there," Dr. Stefanik said.

"We knew, of course, that you

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were on the verge of some great discovery, some new process, perhaps, of controlling human development. A genetical means, our biologists tell me, which might have made us all supermen, tall and brilliant, and immune to disease. A race of Pavlovs and Stakhanovs. Do you deny this?"

Dr. Stefanik merely sucked upon his pipe calmly, twisted a valve half hidden in the greenery. A spray of brilliant green liquid emerged from the nozzle of the hose, bathing the plants in a gentle emerald mist.

"It is true," he said at last, "that I had experimented in those days with a new process of alloploidy."

"And what is that?"

"Alloploidy is the manipulation of chromosomic patterns which allows us to superimpose the character of our most perfect specimens upon those of less fortunate hereditary traits within the species."

"I see," said Colonel Glinka, who had not really quite seen. "Exactly. A super-race, to rule the world. Imagine, Comrade!"

"Only super-rats and the like," Dr. Stefanik told him calmly, "for you may go home and tell them that I have never seen fit to experiment with human beings, Glinka, and I never will."

"*I* tell them *that?*" Colonel Glinka cried. "Would I dare? Oh, no, you must tell them yourself. That is why you will have to return with me."

"Never!"

Colonel Glinka sighed prodigiously. "I am afraid that our country is going to be dogs-in-the-manger in this matter," he said. "You see, we are a jealous people by nature, and if we cannot have you, no one shall." And, deliberately, he laid the Malacca cane across his left arm, so that its tip was pointed squarely at Dr. Stefanik and the sinister round hole there clearly revealed to him.

"How melodramatic that is," Dr. Stefanik said.

"I know it," said Colonel Glinka, "but you must remember that the customs officials in this part of the world are exceedingly tiresome about firearms. This little gem, now, is quite discreet, and very accurate, and it will shoot you three times before you can say 'Never.' Will you not change your mind?"

"No."

"I *did* so want to become tall and brilliant," Colonel Glinka said regretfully, and he started to press the handle of the cane.

"We are as tall as we stand," said Dr. Stefanik, and, swiftly focusing the nozzle of the irrigation hose to a thin stream, squirted the stinging green fluid in Colonel Glinka's right and left eye.

"I know that you are in here somewhere!" Colonel Glinka yelped. "Be assured that I shall find you, Comrade, and when I do, it

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will not be pleasant for you! Oh, my — no, indeed!"

His eyes were red and streaming. He wiped them with the lavender-scented handkerchief, got down upon his hands and knees and started to crawl along the terraced rows of tropical plants, looking under each bench as he came to it. When he had reached the end, he turned and crawled up the other side.

At the far end of the conservatory, he stood up with a baffled grunt. "I know that you are in here," he said.

Something tickled the back of his neck. He whirled like a Dervish, but found only a drooping, blood-red plant like nothing ever created by nature confronting him.

"I am getting jumpy," Colonel Glinka growled. "A little jumpy in my business is good, but too much is bad for the health." And he went, straightway, and closed the back door of the conservatory and dragged a heavy rack of trailing orchids in front of it, humming a furious little march from *The Guardsman* as he worked.

"You must know," he said loudly, "that I do not altogether believe you, Stefanik, when you imply that you have abandoned this research. Nor will they. For who, then, are these degenerate wretches who stand upon the hills and gawk at us, and why must you feed them? I know that they were not created by you, but it is possible that they are paid to be your guinea pigs. Perhaps you are all in the pay of the British. Am I right?"

He listened. There was no answer.

Completing his examination of the conservatory, he entered the main villa and searched it thoroughly, as he had been trained to do, looking in every cupboard and closet and under the beds.

When he had exhausted these hiding places, he left by the front door and closed it after him, with a narrow, jamming wedge that he had made of half a lead pencil.

There were many places to hide in the garden, but Colonel Glinka took them one by one, glancing behind him from time to time in order to make certain that he was not being followed around and around the house in a grim sort of Maypole dance.

"I know that you are out here, Comrade," he said.

Presently he had arrived back where he had started, sweating profusely, and was about to retrace the entire circuit when he caught a glimpse of something moving in the undergrowth of patchouli near the gate. He aimed the Malacca cane and pressed a part of its handle with his thumb. A bullet whined off the steel gatepost.

"Stop there, my friend!" he commanded.

Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar slow-

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ly rose from the bushes with his hands high above his head.

"You got me, Joe," he said.

THE gate was wide open; Stefanik's route of escape now painfully obvious.

Colonel Glinka stared thoughtfully up at the darkening ridges where the sun set in that sanguinary glory observable only in these latitudes, and the dusk crept swiftly up from the seaward-reaching ravines.

"So," Colonel Glinka said. "That is where he has gone, thinking to elude me forever. But you —" he waggled the cane at Abdul, who was already shaking his head in the negative — "will lead me to him. You know his habits, and, what is more, you are almost certainly familiar with every hiding place on this island, since it is your whim to be chased all over it by the females."

"Too dark, Effendi," Abdul said. "If we go out now, they will not only chase us; they will catch us, for they are able to see very well in the dark."

"*Who* will catch us?"

"These people. They are worse than Tuaregs. For all I know, they may be descended from the Tuaregs, and everyone knows that a Tuareg would as soon cut a man's throat as kiss the hem of his burnoose."

"So now they are Tuaregs." Colonel Glinka nodded, with a slow, ferocious smile. "Yet you have hinted that they are the spawn of Comrade Stefanik's genius, the children of genetical science, stamped with 'Made in the Seychelles' upon their bottoms. Perhaps they were grown in the conservatory, from Tuareg seed."

Abdul grimaced. "I do not remember saying that, though sometimes I say things that I don't remember later. Perhaps they are not Tuaregs, then. To tell the truth, they were already living here when I came to work for the Sidi Doctor Stephens, and so naturally I thought that he had made them, for there were no people upon this island in the old days. Only the seabirds and a few wild goats, perhaps."

Colonel Glinka clasped his hand to his forehead. "Stop, stop, or I shall go mad!"

Abdul Hakkim obediently sat down and crossed his legs, starting to light the second of the very bad cigarettes that he had cadged.

"What are you doing?" Colonel Glinka said softly.

"Nothing, Effendi."

"Get up! Get up and get moving, my boy, or make your peace with Allah! Did you suppose for one moment that I had forgotten what we were talking about?"

IT was quite dark by the time they had reached the summit of the ridge, but Colonel Glinka still

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marched along behind Abdul, high good humor restored, prodding him from time to time with the Malacca cane and lecturing him upon social equalities and other Party doctrine.

"Are we nearly there?" he would interrupt himself to ask from time to time.

"I do not know."

"Call out, then."

"I am afraid."

A savage poke with the cane, a war whoop from Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar. No answer.

"We'll get him," Colonel Glinka would say. "Oh, my, yes."

But an hour had passed and still they had encountered no living thing upon the path.

At last Abdul stopped abruptly. They were in a little, narrow ravine, high above the sea, with looming red cliffs all about them, and the booming of the surf upon the distant, windward shore of the island plainly audible.

"Why have we stopped here?" Colonel Glinka said, bumping into him.

"Look there, Effendi!" Abdul whispered, gesturing toward a ledge not ten yards above their heads, where a burnoosed figure stood looking down upon them.

"And there — and there — and there!" Abdul pointed at other little ledges where similar ghostly sentries stood, barely visible in the gloom.

Colonel Glinka looked behind him and saw that there were others that they had passed within a very few feet of, standing upon every shelf and ledge that afforded a foothold above the trail. Dozens and dozens of them.

"Maybe we had better scram out of here, Joe," Abdul suggested.

"I perceive that you are trying to frighten me," Colonel Glinka said. "It won't work."

A stone rattled behind them.

"What was that?" Colonel Glinka demanded, turning around quickly. "Who's there?"

SOMETHING moved in the shadows, edging into the deeper shadows of the rocks. It was the pursuing female of earlier that afternoon.

Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar, in deep, abdominal disgust, groaned.

"Come here, you!" Colonel Glinka commanded. "Come on over here. Don't be afraid, my little one — I won't hurt you."

She advanced ever so little, a shapeless white wraith attracted by the syrup in his voice. He took one step forward. Carefully she retreated a step.

"Come now," Colonel Glinka said. "Surely it is time that we met. For you may as well know that I am now the master of this island. Now and forevermore, so far as you are concerned, my child. Perhaps I may let you help me clear up a little of its mystery."

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She kept a maddening five or six feet between them, somehow. He could not lessen the distance without alarming her. And so he balanced himself upon the balls of his feet and lunged.

She gave a little cry, stumbled and fell, rolling over and over into a dark little depression beside the path as he clutched at her robe. The garment, still in his hand, unwound easily, peeling her very much like an apple.

"I beg your pardon," Colonel Glinka said, scrambling after her upon his hands and knees, groping for her with outstretched arms. "I beg —" His hand touched something which might have been her ankle. He seized it, held it for a moment, and then, shuddering, let it go, drawing back his hand as if it had been stabbed. By now the night was quite dark.

Colonel Glinka scrambled to his feet, half instinctively raised the deadly Malacca cane.

"Don't do it, Joe!" cried Abdul, coming up from behind him and shoving him hard.

The shot went wild, but the sound of it, echoing up and down the ravine, started an ominous, new sound, the growing, staccato murmur of many voices, a rattling of stones, a hundred different movements in the blackness.

Colonel Glinka fired the last bullet more wildly still, hurled the Malacca cane at them, and ran.

ABDUL Hakkim ben Salazar, who had been many leaps ahead of him, arrived breathless at the front gate of the villa, opened it, dived through, locked it behind him, and threw himself upon the grass to catch his breath.

There was a cheerful glow in the darkness. The slight, grotesque figure of Dr. Stefanik and his pipe emerged from the shadows.

"Ah," Abdul breathed, "where were you, Sidi, when I was out there dying for you?"

"Hiding up the tallest cinnamon tree, like a monkey," Dr. Stefanik said.

They sat there upon the grass for a long while in companionable silence, heeding the sounds of the night, which was balmy and infinitely peaceful.

There came a high-pitched, long-drawn-out scream from somewhere on the ridge.

"They got him," Abdul said.

"And now they will pluck him, I suppose," said Dr. Stefanik. "There, by the way, is a thing that even *I* have never completely understood about them. Their insatiable curiosity, of course, is a vestigial trait that will pass, but this other drive, I fear, this rather alarming passion that they have shown for the upbreeding of the species may be some universal of life itself that no man may touch or alter."

Down the path from the ridge, a small, white-robed figure came

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running, far ahead of the others, bent upon her own schemes of evolution.

Abdul crouched lower in the shadows. "That one makes even the heart of a man swell within his breast," he whispered, "for she does not ever give up."

"That no man may touch," Dr. Stefanik repeated, and nodded his shaggy head wisely. "As an idealist, I may have given them shoes and enlightenment, but I did not give them this, and so they are not altogether mine. *His* kind still professes to believe in the common denominator and the common level, seeking to drag down the few from their gilt palaces and haul up the masses from the muck. Tell me, as a Hadj who is, at the same time, undoubtedly vermin-ridden, do *you* believe in the equality of men — or can you honestly wish it?"

"All of us to be Effendis?"

"Something like that."

Abdul Hakkim ben Salazar thought about it for a time with furrowed brow. "No, Sidi," he said at last, "for then there would be no one to chase us."

The female stopped, knelt in the path.

"What is she doing now?" Dr. Stefanik asked.

"She is taking off her shoes, in order to run faster than me."

"'. . . And cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind'! And yet you told Glinka *I* made them!"

"Ah, but not out of *what*, Sidi," Abdul said.

The female, with a hopeful little bleat, arose and tucked her shoes under her arm, for youth is hope and kids will be kids, and off she went, clip-clop, clip-clop, down the rocky path to the sea.

—CHARLES A. STEARNS

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I Plinglot—*Who You?*

By FREDERIK POHL

Illustrated by WOOD

I

LET me see, I said, this is a time for urbane. Say little. Suggest much. So I smiled and nodded wisely without words, though the flash bulbs were fierce.

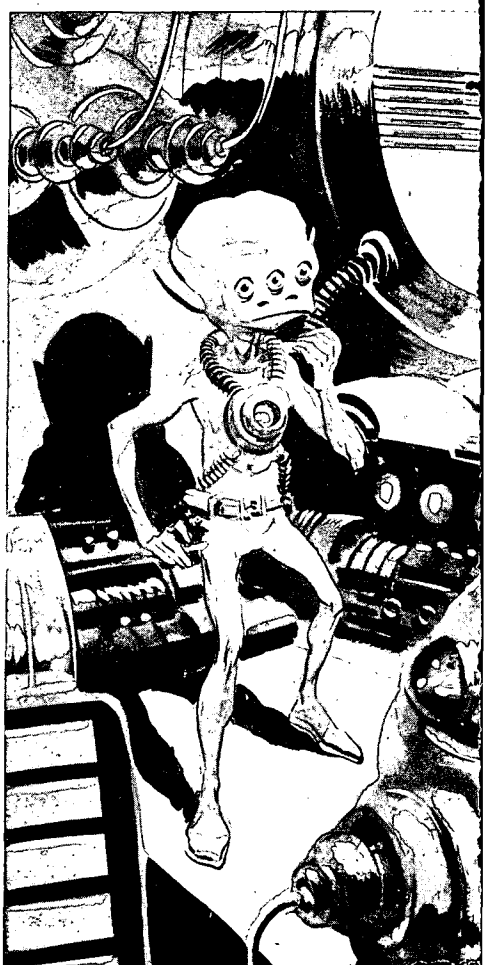
The committee room was not big enough. They had had to move the hearings. Oh, it was hot. Senator Schnell came leaping down the aisle, sweating, his forehead glistening, his gold tooth shining, and took my arm like a trap.

"Capital, Mr. Smith," he cried, nodding and grinning. "I am so glad you got here on time! One moment."

And he planted his feet and stopped me. And he turned me about to face the photographers, and he threw an arm around my shoulder as they flashed many bulbs.

"Capital!" said the Senator with a happy voice. "Thanks, fellows! Come along, Mr. Smith!"

They found me a first-class seat, near a window, with the air-conditioning making such a clatter that I could scarcely hear, but what was there to hear until I myself spoke?



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Never mind to answer who you — I Plinglot ask only out of polite — you are two-eyes and you will soon be joining three-eyes!

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Outside, the Washington Monument cast aluminum rays from the sun.

"We'll get started in a minute," whispered Mr. Hagsworth in my ear. He was young and working for the committee. "As soon as the networks give us the go-ahead."

He patted my shoulder in a friendly way, with pride. They were always doing something with shoulders. He had brought me to the committee and thus I was, he thought, a sort of possession of his, a gift for Senator Schnell, though we know how wrong he was in that, of course. But he was proud. It was very hot and I had in me many headlines.

Q. (*Mr. Hagsworth*) Will you state your name, sir?

A. Robert Smith.

Q. Is that your real name?

A. No.

OH, that excited them all! They rustled and coughed and whispered, those in the many seats. Senator Schnell flashed his gold tooth. Senator Loveless, who was his enemy or his adjutant, as it were, a second commander of the committee but of opposite party, he frowned under stiff silvery hair. But he knew I would say that. He had heard it all in executive session the night before.

Mr. Hagsworth did not waste the moment. He went right ahead over the coughs and the rustles.

Q. Sir, have you adopted the identity of "Robert Smith" in order to further your investigations on behalf of this committee?

A. I have.

Q. And can you —

Q. (*Senator Loveless*) Excuse me.

Q. (*Mr. Hagsworth*) Certainly, Senator.

Q. (*Senator Loveless*) Thank you, Mr. Hagsworth. Sir—that is, Mr. Smith — do I understand that it would not be proper, or advisable, for you to reveal — that is, to make public — your true or correct identity at this time? Or in these circumstances?

A. Yes.

Q. (*Senator Loveless*) Thank you very much, Mr. Smith. I just wanted to get that point cleared up.

Q. (*Mr. Hagsworth*) Then tell us, Mr. Smith —

Q. (*Senator Loveless*) It's clear now.

Q. (*The Chairman*) Thank you for helping us clarify the matter, Senator. Mr. Hagsworth, you may proceed.

Q. (*Mr. Hagsworth*) Thank you, Senator Schnell. Thank you, Senator Loveless. Then, Mr. Smith, will you tell us the nature of the investigations you have just concluded for this committee?

A. Certainly. I was investigating the question of interstellar space travel.

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Q. That is, travel between the planets of different stars?
A. That's right.
Q. And have you reached any conclusions as to the possibility of such a thing?
A. Oh, yes. Not just conclusions. I have definite evidence that one foreign power is in direct contact with creatures living on the planet of another star, and expects to receive a visit from them shortly.
Q. Will you tell us the name of that foreign power?
A. Russia.

Oh, it went very well. Pandemonium became widespread, much noise, much hammering by Senator Schnell, and at the recess all the networks said it was a big Neilsen. And Mr. Hagsworth was so pleased that he hardly asked me about the file again, which I enjoyed as it was a hard answer to give.

"Good theater, ah, Mr. Smith," he winked.

I only smiled.

THE afternoon also was splendidly hot, especially as Senator Schnell kept coming beside me and the bulbs flashed. It was excellent, excellent.

Q. (*Mr. Hagsworth*) Mr. Smith, this morning you told us that a foreign power was in contact with a race of beings living on a planet of the star Aldebaran. Is that right? It is correct?
A. Yes.
Q. Can you describe that race for us? I mean the ones you have referred to as "Aldebaranians"?
A. Certainly, although their own name for themselves is — is a word in their language which you might here render as "Triops." They average about eleven inches tall. They have two legs, like yourself. They have three eyes and they live in crystal cities under the water, although they are air-breathers.
Q. Why is that, Mr. Smith?
A. The surface of their planet is ravaged by enormous beasts against which they are defenseless.
Q. But they have powerful weapons?
A. Oh, very powerful, Mr. Hagsworth.

And then it was time for me to take it out and show it to them, the Aldebaranian hand-weapon. It was small and soft and I had to fire it with a bent pin, but it made a hole through three floors and the cement of the basement, and they were very interested. Oh, yes!

So I talked all that afternoon about the Aldebaranians, though what did they matter? Mr. Hagsworth did not ask me about other races, on which I could have said something of greater interest. Afterward we came to my suite at the Mayflower Hotel and Mr. Hags-

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worth said with admiration: "You handled yourself beautifully, Mr. Smith. When this is over, I wonder if you would consider some sort of post here in Washington."

"When this is over?"

"Oh," he said, "I've been around for some years, Mr. Smith. I've seen them come and I've seen them go. Every newspaper in the country is full of Aldebaranians tonight, but next year? They'll be shouting about something new."

"They will not," I said surely.

HE shrugged. "As you say," he said agreeably. "At any rate, it's a great sensation now. Senator Schnell is tasting the headlines. He's up for re-election next year, you know, and just between the two of us, he was afraid he might be defeated."

"Impossible, Mr. Hagsworth," I said out of certain knowledge, but could not convey this to him. He thought I only was being polite. It did not matter.

"He'll be gratified to hear that," said Mr. Hagsworth and he stood up and winked, he was a great human for winking. "But think about what I said about a job, Mr. Smith . . . Or would you care to tell me your real name?"

Why not? Sporting! "Plinglot," I said.

He said with a puzzled face, "Plinglot? Plinglot? That's an odd name."

I didn't say anything. Why should I?

"But you're an odd man," he sighed. "I don't mind telling you that there are a lot of questions I'd like to ask. For instance, the file folder of correspondence between you and Senator Heffernan. I don't suppose you'd care to tell me how come no employee of the committee remembers anything about it, although the folder turned up in our files just as you said it would?"

Senator Heffernan was dead; that was why the correspondence had been with him. But I know tricks for awkward questions — you give only another question instead of answer.

"Don't you trust me, Mr. Hagsworth?"

He looked at me queerly and left without speaking. No matter. It was time. I had very much to do.

"No calls," I told the switchboard person, "and no visitors. I must rest." Also there would be a guard, Hagsworth had promised. I wondered how he would have arranged the same if I had not requested it, but that also did not matter.

I sat quickly in what looked, for usual purposes, like a large armchair, purple embroidery on the headrest. It was my spaceship, with cosmetic upholstery. *Z-z-z-z-zit,* quick like that, that's all there was to it and I was there.

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II

OLD days I could not have timed it so well, for the old one slept all the day and worked, drinking, all the night. But now they kept capitalist hours.

"Good morning, *gospodin,*" cried the man in the black tunic, leaping up alertly as I opened the tall double doors. "I trust you slept well."

I had changed quickly into pajamas and a bathrobe. Stretching, yawning, I grumbled in flawless Russian in a sleepy way: "All right, all right. What time is it?"

"Eight in the morning, Gospodin Arakelian. I shall order your breakfast."

"Have we time?"

"There is time, *gospodin,* especially as you have already shaved."

I looked at him with more care, but he had a broad open Russian face. There was no trickery on it or suspicion. I drank some tea and changed into street clothing again, a smaller size as I was now smaller. The Hotel Metropole doorman was holding open the door of the black Zis, and we bumped, bumped over cobblestones to the white marble building with no name. Here in Moscow it was also hot, though only early morning.

This morning their expressions were all different in the dim, cool room. Worried. There were three of them:

Blue eyes; Kvetchnikov. The tall one, with eyes so very blue, he looked at the wall and the ceiling but not at me, and though sometimes he smiled, there was nothing behind it.

Red beard; Muzhnets. He tapped with a pencil softly, on thin sheets of paper.

And the old one. He sat like a squat fat Buddha. His name was Tadjensevitch.

Yesterday they were reserved, suspicious, but they could not help themselves; they would do whatever I asked. There was no choice for them; they reported to the chief himself, and how could they let such a thing as I had told them go untaken? No, they must swallow bait. But today there was worry on their faces.

The worry was not about me; they knew me. Or so they thought. "Hello, hello, Arakelian," said Blue Eyes to me, though his gaze examined the rug in front of my chair. "Have you more to tell us today?"

I asked without alarm: "What more could I have?"

"Oh," said Blue-Eye Kvetchnikov, looking at the old man, "perhaps you can explain what happened in Washington last night."

"In Washington?"

"In Washington, yes. A man appeared before one of the committees of their Senate. He spoke of the *Aldebaratniki,* and he spoke

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also of the Soviet Union. Arakelian, tell us how this is possible."

The old man whispered softly: "Show him the dispatch."

RED Beard jumped. He stopped tapping on the thin paper and handed it to me. "Read!" he ordered in a voice of danger, though I was not afraid.

I read. It was a diplomatic telegram, from their embassy in Washington, and what it said was what every newspaper said, it was no diplomatic secret, it was headlines. One Robert Smith, a fictitious name, real identity unknown, had appeared before the Schnell Committee. He had told them of Soviet penetration of the stars. Considering limitations, excellent, it was an admirably accurate account.

I creased the paper and handed back to Muzhnets. "I have read it."

Old One: "You have nothing to say?"

"Only this." I leaped up on two legs and pointed at him. "I did not think you would bungle this! How dared you allow this information to become public?"

"How—"

"How did that weapon get out of your country?"

"Weap—"

"Is this Soviet efficiency?" I cried loudly. "Is it proletarian discipline?"

Red-Beard Muzhnets intervened. "Softly, Comrade," he cried. "Please! We must not lose tempers!"

I made a sound of disgust. I did it very well. "I warned you," I said, low, and made my face sad and stern. "I told you that there was a danger that the bourgeois-capitalists would interfere. Why did you not listen? Why did you permit their spies to steal the weapon I gave you?"

Tadjensevitch whispered agedly: "That weapon is still here."

"But this report—"

"There must be another weapon, Arakelian. And do you see? That means the Americans are also in contact with the *Aldebaratniki*."

It was time for chagrin. I admitted: "You are right."

He sighed. "Comrades, the Marshal will be here in a moment. Let us settle this." I composed my face and looked at him. "Arakelian, answer this question straight out. Do you know how this American could have got in touch with the *Aldebaratniki* now?"

"How could I, *gospodin?*"

"That," he said thoughtfully, "is not a straight answer but it is answer enough. How could you? You have not left the Metropole. And in any case the Marshal is now coming. I hear his guard."

WE all stood up, very formal, it was a question of socialist discipline.

In came this man, the Marshal,

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who ruled two hundred million humans, smoking a cigarette in a paper holder, with small pig's eyes looking here and there and at me. Five very large men were with him, but they never said anything at all. He sat down grunting. It was not necessary for him to speak loud or to speak clear, it was necessary that those around him should hear anyhow. It was not deafness that caused Tadjensevitch to wear a hearing aid.

The old man jumped up. "Comrade Party Secretary," he said, not now whispering, no, "this man is P.P. Arakelian."

Grunt from the Marshal.

"Yes, Comrade Party Secretary, he has come to us with the suggestion that we sign a treaty with a race of creatures inhabiting a planet of the star Aldebaran. Our astronomers say they cannot dispute any part of his story. And the M.V.D. has assuredly verified his reliability in certain documents signed by the late—" cough—"Comrade Beria." That too had not been easy and would have been less so if Beria had not been dead.

Grunt from the Marshal. Old Tadjensevitch looked expectant at me.

"I beg your pardon?" I said.

Old Tadjensevitch said without patience: "The Marshal asked about terms."

"Oh," I bowed, "there are no terms. These are unworldly creatures, excellent comrade." I thought to mention it was a joke, but none laughed. "Unworldly," you see, "They wish only to be friends. With you, with the Americans, they do not know the difference, it is all in whom they first see."

Grunt. "Will they sign a treaty?" Tadjensevitch translated.

"Of course."

Grunt. Translation: "Have they enemies? There is talk in the American document of creatures that destroy them. We must know what enemies our new friends may have."

"Only animals, excellent comrade. Like your wolves of Siberia, but huge as the great blue whale."

Grunt. Tadjensevitch said: "The Marshal asks if you can guarantee that the creatures will come first to us."

"No. I can only suggest. I cannot guarantee there will be no error."

"But if—"

"If!" I cried loudly. "If there is error, you have Red Army to correct it!"

THEY looked at me strange. They did not expect that. But they did not understand.

I gave them no time. I said quickly: "Now, Excellency, one thing more. I have a present for you."

Grunt.

I hastily said: "I saved it, Comrade. Excuse me. In my pocket."

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I reached, most gently; those five men all looked at me now with much care. For the first demonstration, I had produced an Aldebaranian hand-weapon, three inches long, capable of destroying a bull at five hundred yards, but now for this Russian I had more.

"See," I said, and took it out to hand him, a small glittering thing, carved of a single solid diamond, an esthetic statue four inches long.

Oh, I did not like to think of it wasted! But it was important that this man should be off guard, and so I handed it to one of the tall silent men, who thumbed it over and then passed it on, scowling, to the Marshal. I was sorry, yes. It was a favorite thing, a clever carving that they had made in the water under Aldebaran's rays; it was almost greater than I could have made myself. No, I will not begrudge it them, it was greater, I could not have done so well!

Unfortunate that so great a race should have needed attention; unfortunate that I must now give this memento away; but I needed to make an effect and, yes, I did!

Oh, diamond is great to humans; the Marshal looked surprised, and grunted, and one of the silent tall five reached in *his* pocket, and took out something that glittered on silken ribbon. He looped it around my neck.

"Hero of Soviet Labor," he said, "First Class. With emeralds."

"Thank you, Marshal," I said.

Grunt. "The Marshal," said Tadjensevitch in a thin, thin voice, "thanks you. Certain investigations must be made. He will see you again tomorrow morning."

This was wrong, but I did not wish to make him right; I said again: "Thank you."

A grunt from the Marshal; he stopped and looked at me, and then he spoke loud so that, though he grunted, I understood. "Tell," he said, "the *Aldebaratniki,* tell them they must come to us. If their ship should land in the wrong country . . ."

He stopped at the door and looked at me powerfully.

"I hope," he said, "that it will not," and he left, and they escorted me back in the Zis sedan to the room at the Hotel Metropole.

III

SO that was that and *z-z-z-z-zit,* I was gone again, leaving an empty and heavily guarded room in the old hotel.

In Paris it was midday, I had spent a long time in Moscow. In Paris it was also hot, and as the gray-haired small man with the rosette of the Legion in his buttonhole escorted me along the Champs Elysees, slim-legged girls in bright short skirts smiled at us. No matter. I did not care one pin for all those bright slim girls.

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But it was necessary to look, the man expected it of me, and he was the man I had chosen. In America I worked through a committee of their Senate, in Russia the Comrade Party Secretary, here my man was a M. Duplessin, a small straw but the one to wreck a dromedary.

He was a member of the Chamber of Deputies, elected as a Christian Socialist Radical Democrat, a party which stood between the Non-Clerical Catholic Workers' Movement on one side and the F.C.M., or Movement for Christian Brotherhood, on the other. His party had three deputies in the Chamber, and the other two hated each other. Thus M. Duplessin held the balance of power in his party, which held the balance of power in the Right Centrist Coalition, which held the balance through the entire Anti-Communist Democratic Front which supported the premier. Yes. M. Duplessin was the man I needed.

I had slipped a folder into the locked files of a Senate committee and forged credentials into the records of Russia's M.V.D., but both together were easier than the finding of this right man. But I had him now, and he was taking me to see certain persons who also knew his importance, persons who would do as he told them.

"Monsieur," he said gravely, "it lacks a small half-hour of the appointed time. Might one not enjoy an aperitif?"

"One might," I said fluently, and permitted him to find us a table under the trees, for I knew that he was unsure of me, it was necessary to cause him to become sure.

"Ah," said Duplessin, sighing, and placed hat, cane and gloves on a filigree metal chair.

He ordered drinks and when they came sipped slightly, looking away.

"My friend," he said at last, "tell me of *les aldebaragnards*. We French have traditions — liberty, equality, fraternity — we made Arabs into citizens of the Republic — always has France been mankind's spiritual home. But, monsieur. Nevertheless. *Three* eyes?"

"They are really very nice," I told him with great sincerity, though it was probably no longer true.

"Hum."

"And," I said, "they know of love."

HE said mistily, sighing again, "Love. Tell me, monsieur. Tell me of love on Aldebaran."

"They live on a planet," I misstated somewhat, "Aldebaran is the star itself. But I will tell you what you ask, M. Duplessin. It is thus: When a young Triop, for so they call themselves, comes of age, he swims far out into the wide sea. Far from his crystal city, out

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into the pellucid water, where giant fan-tailed fish of rainbow colors swim endlessly above, tinting the pale sunlight that filters through the water and their scales. Tiny bright fish give off starlike flashes from patterned luminescent spots on their scales."

"It sounds most beautiful, monsieur," Duplessin said with polite.

"It is most beautiful. And the young Triop swims until he sees—Her."

"Ah, monsieur." He was more than polite, I considered, he was interested.

"They speak not a word," I added, "for the water is all around and they wear masks, otherwise they could not breathe. They cannot speak, no, and one cannot see the other's eyes. They approach in silence and in mystery."

He sighed and sipped his cassis.

"Then," I said, "they know, though there is no way that they can know. But they do. They swim about each other searchingly, tenderly, sadly. Yes, sadly—is beauty not always in some way sad? A moment. And then they are one."

"They do not speak?"

I shook my head.

"Ever?"

"Never until all is over and they meet elsewhere again."

"Ah, monsieur!" He stared into his small glass of tincture. "Monsieur," he said, "may one hope—that is, is it possible—oh, monsieur! Might one go there, soon?"

I said with all my cunning: "All the things are possible, M. Duplessin, if the Triops can be saved from destruction. Consider for yourself, if you please, that to turn such a people over to the brutes with the Red Star—or these with the forty-nine white stars, what difference?—is to destroy them."

"Never, my friend, never!" he cried strongly. "Let them come! Let them entrust themselves to France! France will protect them, my friend, or France will die!"

IT was all very simple after that, I was free within an hour after lunch and, certainly, *z-z-z-z-zit*.

My spaceship deposited me in this desert, Mojave, I think. Or almost Mojave, in its essential Americanness. Yes. It was in America, for what other place would do? I had accomplished much, but there was yet a cosmetic touch or two before I could say I had accomplished all.

I scanned the scene, everything was well, there was no one. Distantly planes howled, but of no importance: stratosphere jets, what would they know of one man on the sand four miles below? I worked.

Five round trips, carrying what was needed, between this desert place and my bigger ship. And where was that? Ah. Safe. It hurled swinging around Mars, yes, quite

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safe. Astronomers might one day map it, but on that day it would not matter, no. Oh, it would not matter at all.

Since there was time, on my first trip I reassumed my shape and ate, it was greatly restful. Nine useful arms and ample feet, it became easy; quickly I carried one ton of materials, two thousand pounds, from my armchair ferry to the small shelter in which I constructed my cosmetic appliance. Shelter? Why a shelter, you ask? Oh, I say, for artistic reasons, and in the remote chance that some low-flying plane might blundersomely pass, though it would not. But it might.

Let's see, I said, let me think, uranium and steel, strontium and cobalt, a touch of sodium for yellow, have I everything? Yes. I have everything, I said, and I assembled the cosmetic bomb and set the fuse. Good-by, bomb, I said with affection and, *z-z-z-z-zit,* armchair and Plinglot were back aboard my ship circling Mars. Nearly done, nearly done!

There quickly I assembled the necessary data for the Aldebaranian rocket, my penultimate—or Next to Closing—task.

Now. This penultimate task, it was not a difficult one, no, but it demanded some concentration. I had a ship. No fake, no crude imitation! It was an authentic rocket ship of the Aldebaranians, designed to travel to their six moons, with vent baffles for underwater takeoff due to certain exigencies (*e.g.,* inimical animals ashore) of their culture. Yes. It was real. I had brought it on purpose all the way.

Now, I say once more, now; I did what I had necessarily to do, which was to make a course for this small ship. There was no crew. (Not anywhere.) The course was easy to compute, I did it rather well, but there was setting of instruments, automation of controls — oh, it took time, took time — but I did it.

It was my way, I am workmanlike and reliable, ask Mother. The human race would not know an authentic Aldebaranian rocket from a lenticular Cetan shrimp, but they *might,* hey? The Aldebaranians had kindly developed rockets and it was no great trouble to bring, as well as more authentic. I brought. And having completed all this, and somewhat pleased, I stood to look around.

But I was not alone.

THIS was not a fortunate thing, it meant trouble.

I at once realized what my companion, however unseen, must be, since it could not be human.

I stood absolutely motionless and looked, looked. As you have in almost certain probability never observed the interior of an Aldebaranian rocket, I shall describe:

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Green metal in cruciform shapes ("chairs"), sparkling mosaics of colored light ("maps"), ferrous alloys in tortured cuprous-glassy conjunction ("instruments"). All motionless. But something moved.

I saw! An Aldebaranian! One of the Triops, a foot-high mannikin, looking up at me out of three terrified blue eyes. Yes, I had brought the ship, but I had not brought it empty. One of the creatures had stowed away aboard. And there it was.

I lunged toward it savagely. It looked up at me and squeaked like a bell: "Why? Why, Plinglot, why did you kill my people?"

It is so annoying to be held to account for every little thing. But I said in moderate cunning: "Stand quiet, small creature, and let me get hold of you. Why are you not dead?"

It squeaked pathetically—not in English, to be sure! but I make allowances — it squeaked: "Plinglot, you came to our planet as a friend from outer space, one who wished to help our people join forces to destroy the great killing land beasts."

"That seemed appropriate," I conceded.

"We believed you, Plinglot! All our nations believed you. But you caused dissension. You pitted us one against the other, so that one nation no longer trusted another. We had abandoned war, Plinglot, for more than a hundred years, for we dared not wage war."

"That is true," I agreed.

"But you tricked us! War came, Plinglot! And at your hands. As this ship was plucked from its berth with only myself aboard, I received radio messages that a great war was breaking out and that the seas were to be boiled. It is the ultimate weapon, Plinglot! By now my planet is dry and dead. Why did you do it?"

"Small Triop," I lectured, "listen to this. You are male, one supposes, and you must know that no female Aldebaranian survives. Very well. You are the last of your race. There is no future. You might as well be dead."

"I know," he wept.

"And therefore you should kill yourself. Check," I invited, "my logic with the aid of your computing machine, if you wish. But please do not disturb the course computations I have set up on it."

"It is not necessary to check your logic, Plinglot," he said with sad. "You are right."

"So kill yourself!" I bellowed.

The small creature, how foolish, would not do this. No, he said: "I do not want to, Plinglot," apologetically. "But I will not disturb your course."

WELL, it was damned decent of him, in a figure of speech, I believed, for that course was

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most important to me. On it depended the suceess of my present mission, for it was to demolish Earth as I had his own planet. I attempted to explain, in way of thanks, but he would not understand, no.

"Earth?" he squeaked feebly.

I attempted to make him see, yes, Earth, that planet so far away, it too had a population which was growing large and fierce and smart, it too was hovering on the fringe of space travel. Oh, it was dangerous, but he would not see, though I explained and I am Plinglot. I can allow no rivals in space, it is my assigned task, given in hand by the great Mother. Well. I terrified him, it was all I could do.

Having locked him in a helpless compartment of his own ship, I consulted my time.

It was fleeing. I flopped onto my armchair; *z-z-z-z-zit;* once again in the room in the Hotel Mayflower, Washington, U.S.A.

Things progressed, all was ready. I opened the door, affecting having just awaked. A chambermaid turned from dusting pictures on the wall, said, "Good morning, sir," looked at me and — oh! screamed. Screamed in a terrible tone.

Careless Plinglot! I had forgot to return to human form.

Most fortunately, she fainted. I quickly turned human and found a rope. It took very much time, and time was passing, while the rocket hastened to cover forty million miles; it would arrive soon where I had sent it. I hurried. Hardly, hardly, I made myself do it, though as anyone on Tau Ceti knows, it was difficult for me. I tied her. I forced a pillowcase, or one corner of it, into her mouth so that she might not cry out; and even locked her in a closet. Oh, it was hard.

Questions? Difficulty? Danger? Yes. They were all there to be considered, too, but I had no time to consider them. Time was passing, I have said, and time passed for me.

It was only a temporary expedient. In time she would be found. Of course. This did not matter. In time there would *be* no time, you see, for time would come to an end for chambermaid, Duplessin, Senators and the M.V.D., and then what?

Then Plinglot would have completed this, his mission, and two-eyes would join three-eyes, good-by.

IV

SENATOR Schnell this time was waiting for me at the curb, in a hollow square of newsmen.

"Mr. Smith," he cried, "how good to see you. Now, please, fellows! Mr. Smith is a busy man.

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Oh, all right, just one picture."

And he made to shoo the photographers off while wrapping himself securely to my side.

"Terrible men," he whispered out of the golden corner of his mouth, smiling, smiling, "how they pester me!"

"I am sorry, Senator," I said politely and permitted him to lead me through the flash barrage to the large room for the hearings.

Q. (*Mr. Hagsworth*) Mr. Smith, in yesterday's testimony you gave us to understand that Russia was making overtures to the alien creatures from Aldebaran. Now I'd like to call your attention to something. Have you seen this morning's papers?

A. No.

Q. Then let me read you an extract from Pierce Truman's column which has just come to my attention. It starts, "After yesterday's sensational rev—"

Q. (*Senator Loveless*) Excuse me. Mr. Hagsworth.

Q. (*Mr. Hagsworth*) "—elations."

Q. (*Senator Loveless*) I only want to know, or to ask, if that document — that is, the newspaper which you hold in your hand— is a matter of evidence. By this I mean an exhibit. If so, I raise the question, or rather suggestion, that it should be properly marked and entered.

Q. (*Mr. Hagsworth*) Well, Senator, I—

Q. (*Senator Loveless*) As an exhibit, I mean.

Q. (*Mr. Hagsworth*) Yes, as an exhibit. I—

Q. (*Senator Loveless*) Excuse me for interrupting. It seemed an important matter — important procedural matter, that is.

Q. (*Mr. Hagsworth*) Certainly, Senator. Well, Senator, I intended to read it only in order to have Mr. Smith give us his views.

Q. (*Senator Loveless*) Thank you for that explanation, Mr. Hagsworth. Still it seems to me, or at the moment it appears to me, that it ought to be marked and entered.

Q. (*The Chairman*) Senator, in my view—

Q. (*Senator Loveless*) As an exhibit, that is.

Q. (*The Chairman*) Thank you for that clarification, Senator. In my view, however, since as Mr. Hagsworth has said it is only Mr. Smith's views that he is seeking to get out, then the article itself is not evidence but merely an adjunct to questioning. Anyway, frankly, Senator, that's the way I see it. But I don't want to impose my will on the Committee. I hope you understand that, all of you.

Q. (*Mr. Hagsworth*) Certainly, sir.

Q. (*Senator Loveless*) Oh, none of us has any idea, or suspicion, Senator Schnell, that you have

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any such design, or purpose.

Q. (*Senator Duffy*) Of course not.

Q. (*Senator Fly*) No, not here...

OH, time, time! I looked at the clock on the wall and time was going, I did not wish to be here when it started. Of course. Ten o'clock. Ten-thirty. Five minutes approaching eleven. Then this Mr. Pierce Truman's column at last was marked and entered and recorded after civil objection and polite concession from Senator Schnell and in thus wise made an immutable, permanent, indestructible part of the files of this mutable, transient, soon to be destroyed committee. Oh, comedy! But it would not be for laughing if I dawdled here too late.

Somehow, somehow, Mr. Hagsworth was entitled at last to read his column and it said as follows.

> After yesterday's sensational revelations before the Schnell Committee, backstage Washington was offering bets that nothing could top the mysterious Mr. Smith's weird story of creatures from outer space. But the toppers may already be on hand. Here are two questions for you, Senator Schnell:
>
> What were three Soviet U.N. military attaches doing at a special showing at the Hayden Planetarium last night?
>
> And what's the truth beyond the reports that are filtering into C.I.A. from sources in Bulgaria, concerning a special parade scheduled for Moscow's Red Square tomorrow to welcome "unusual and very special" V.I.P.s, names unknown?

Exhausted from this effort, the committee declared a twenty-minute recess. I glowered at the clock, time, time!

Mr. Hagsworth had plenty of time, he thought, he was not worried.

He cornered me in the cloakroom.

"Smoke?" he said graciously, offering a package of cigarettes. I said thank you, I do not smoke. "Care for a drink?" I do not drink, I told him. "Or—?" He nodded toward the tiled room with the chromium pipes; I do not do that either, but I could not tell him so, only I shook my head.

"Well, Mr. Smith," he said again, "you make a good witness. I'm sorry," he added, "to spring that column on you like that. But I couldn't help it."

"No matter," I said.

"You're a good sport, Smith. You see, one of the reporters handed it to me as we walked into the hearing room."

"All right," I said, wishing to be thought generous.

"Well, I had to get it into the record. What's it about, eh?"

I said painfully (time, time!), "Mr. Hagsworth, I have testified the Russians also wish the ship from Aldebaran. And it is coming close. Soon it will land."

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"Good," he said, smiling and rubbing his hands, "very good! And you will bring them to us?"

"I will do," I said, "the best I can," ambiguously, but that was enough to satisfy him, and recess was over.

Q. (*Mr. Hagsworth*) Mr. Smith, do I understand that you have some knowledge of the proposed movements of the voyagers from Aldebaran?

A. Yes.

Q. Can you tell us what you know?

A. I can. Certainly. Even now an Aldebaranian rocket ship is approaching the Earth. Through certain media of communication which I cannot discuss in open hearing, as you understand, certain proposals have been made to them on behalf of this country.

Q. And their reaction to these proposals, Mr. Smith?

A. They have agreed to land in the United States for discussions.

HAPPY commotion, the idiots. The flash bulbs went like mad. Only the clock was going, going, and I commenced to worry, where was the ship? Was forty lousy million miles so much? But no, it was not so much; and when the messenger came racing in the door, I knew it was time.

One messenger, first. He ran wildly down among the seats, searching, then stopping at the seat on the aisle where Pierce Truman sat regarding me with an ophidian eye, stopped and whispered. Then a couple more, strangers, hatless and hair flying, also messengers, came hurrying in — and more — to the committee, to the newsmen — the word had got out.

"Mr. Chairman! Mr. Chairman!" It was Senator Loveless, he was shouting, some person had whispered in his ear and he could not wait to tell his news. But everyone had that news, you see, it was no news to the chairman, he already had a slip of paper in his hand.

He stood up and stared blindly into the television cameras, without smile now, the gold tooth not flashing.

He said: "Gentlemen, I—"

And he stopped, for a moment, to catch his breath and to shake his head.

"Gentlemen," he said, "gentlemen, I have here a report," staring incredulous at the scrawled slip of paper.

In the room was quickly silence, even Senator Loveless, and Pierce Truman stopped at the door on his way out to listen.

"This report," he said, "comes from the Arlington Naval Observatory — in, gentlemen, my own home state, the Old Dominion, Virginia—" He paused and shook himself, yes, and made himself look again at the paper. "From the Arlington Naval Observatory, where the radio-telescope experts inform us that an ob-

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ject of unidentified origin and remarkable speed has entered the atmosphere of the Earth from outer space!"

Cries. Sighs. Shouts. But he stopped them, yes, with a hand. "But, gentlemen, that is not all! Arlington has tracked this object and it has landed. Not in our country, gentlemen! Not even in Russia! But—" he shook the paper rattlingly before him—"in North Africa, gentlemen! In the desert of Algeria!"

Oh, much commotion then, but not joyous.

"Doublecross!" shouted someone, and I made an expression of astonish. Adjourned, banged the gavel of the chairman, and only just in time; the clock said nearly twelve and my cosmetic bomb was set for one-fifteen. Oh, I had timed it close. But now was danger and I had to leave, which I did hardly.

But I could not evade Mr. Hagsworth, who rode with me in taxi to hotel, chattering, chattering. I did not listen.

V

NOW this is how it was, an allegory or parable. Make a chemical preparation, you see? Take hydrogen and take oxygen — very pure in both cases — blend them and strike a spark. Nothing happens. They do not burn! It is true, though you may not believe me.

But with something added, yes, they burn. For instance, let the spark be a common match, with so tiny you can hardly detect it a quarter-droplet of water bonded into its substance. Yes, with the water they will burn — more than burn — *kerblam,* the hydrogen and oxygen fiercely unite. Water, it is the catalyst which makes it go.

Similarly, I reflected (unhearing the chatter of Mr. Hagsworth), it is a catalyst which is needed on Earth, and this catalyst I have made, my cosmetic appliance, my bomb.

The chemicals were stewing together nicely. There was a ferment of suspicion in Russia, of fear in America, of jealousy in the African colony of France where I had made the ship land. Oh, they were jumpy now! I could feel forces building around me, even the driver of the cab, half watching the crowded streets, half listening to the hysterical cries of his little radio. To the Mayflower, hurrying. All the while, the city was getting excited around us.

That was the ferment, and by my watch the catalyst was quite near.

"Wait," said Mr. Hagsworth, pleading, in the lobby, "come have a drink, Smith."

"I don't drink."

"I forgot," he apologized. "Well, would you care to sit for a moment in the bar with me? I'd like to talk to you. This is all happening too fast."

"Come along to my room," I said,

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not wanting him, no, but what harm could he do? And I did not want to be away from my purple armchair, not at all.

So up we go and there is still time, I am glad. Enough time. The elevator could have stuck, my door could have somehow been locked against me, by error I could have gone to the wrong floor — no, everything was right. We were there and there was time.

I excused myself a moment (though it could have been forever) and walked into the inner room of this suite. Yes, it was there, ready. It squatted purple, and no human would think, to look at it, that it was anything but an armchair but it was much more and if I went and sat in it, *z-z-z-z-zit,* and I would be gone.

A man spoke.

OH, how I turned with startle, looking. I did not wish a man to be there.

But there a man was, looking at me also, out of the door to the tiled room, red-faced, in blue coveralls, and he spoke.

Well. For a moment, I felt alarm. (I remember, *e.g.,* the human woman whom I had left bound in closet, and pondered that she might have been discovered. But it was not this, no, for on this man's face was only smile.) And he said with apology: "Oh, hello, sir. Sorry. But we had a complaint from the floor below, leak in the plumbing, dripping through their ceiling, I've got it nearly fixed now, sir."

Oh, all right. I shrugged for him and — and — Oh, and went back to Mr. Hagsworth.

It was mistake, the mistake of a true artist, of course. In my mind had been something other than going back to Mr. Hagsworth. I could, exemplarily, have made a further checking expedition. That is, *z-z-z-z-zit,* to the George V Hotel in Paris, and to telephone there M. Duplessin, to insure that he would not allow Russians or Americans near the ship which had landed in that part of Metropolitan France which lies in Africa, Algeria . . . no, not if the Russian ambassadors and the Americans made of his life a living hell.

And then I could also, *z-z-z-z-zit,* to Metropole in Moscow. There to phone Tadjensevitch (not the Marshal, he would not speak on telephone to me) to urge him also on. To say to him: These Americans are about to steal your Aldebaranians, and besides I just have learned about oil deposits, enormous, under the Aldebaranian seas.

Or I could have gone farther. Much farther.

Now this you must know of me —not only of me, but of all Mother's children — if we can go from such danger, such risk, we go. Always. It can be counted upon.

But I did not go. It was the true

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artist, but also I confess one thing more: I was afraid of the man in the blue coveralls.

And also, as true artist, there was this other consideration prevailing, that maybe something would go wrong.

Oh, I did not wish this.

SO I went back to Mr. Hagsworth. It was not needed, really it was not. It was only insurance in the event that somehow my careful plans went wrong — that perhaps the French in Algeria should make contact (how? ridiculous! they could not have done it!) with the little male Aldebaranian in the ship I had made to land there, or that the Americans should somehow make contact with the Soviets and compare notes. Foolishness. But I went back, I wished to be there until the very end. Or nearly. And also there was that big, frightening man with the red face.

Z-z-z-z-zit and I could have been away.

But as things turned, I went back, and Mr. Hagsworth was on telephone, his eyes bright and angry. I thought I knew what he was hearing. I listened to hear if there were, perhaps, sounds from the closet, but there were none; good. Difficult as it was, I had tied well. And then Mr. Hagsworth looked up.

He said, bleak: "I have news, Smith. It's started."

"Started?"

"Oh," he said without patience, "you know what I'm talking about, Smith. The trouble's started. These Aldebaranians of yours, they've stirred up a hornet's nest, and now the stinging has begun. I just talked to the White House. There's a definite report of a nuclear explosion in the Mojave Desert."

"No!"

"Yes," he said, nodding, "there is no doubt. It can't be anything but a Russian missile, though their aim is amazingly bad. Can it?"

"What else possibly?" I asked with logic. "How terrible! And I suppose you have retaliated, hey? Sent a flight of missiles to Moscow?"

"Of course. What else could we do?"

He had put his finger on it, yes, he was right, I had computed it myself.

"Nothing," I said and wrung his hand, "and may the best country win."

"Or planet," he said, nodding.

"Planet?" I let go his hand. I looked. I waited. It was a time for astonish. I did not speak.

Mr. Hagsworth said, speaking very slow: "Smith, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Talk," I invited.

Outside, there was sudden shouting.

"They've heard about the bomb," conjectured Mr. Hagsworth, but he paid no more attention. He said:

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"In school, I knew a Fat Boy." He said: "He always got his way. Everybody was afraid of him. But he never fought, he only divided others, do you see, and got them to fight each other."

I stood tall — yes, and brave! I dare use that word "brave," it applies.

One would think that it would be like a human to say he is brave before a blinded fluttering moth, "brave" where there is no danger to be brave against; but though this was a human only, in that room I felt danger. Incredible, but it was so and I did not wish it.

I said: "What are you talking about, Mr. Hagsworth?"

"An idea I had," he said softly with a face like death. "About a murderer. Maybe he comes from another planet and, for reasons of his own, wants to destroy our planet. Maybe this isn't the first one — he might have stopped, for example, at Aldebaran."

"I do not want to hear this," I said, with true.

BUT he did not stop. He said: "We human beings have faults and an outsider with brains and a lot of special knowledge — say, the kind of knowledge that could get a file folder into our records, in spite of all our security precautions — such an outsider might use our faults to destroy us. Senate Committee hearings — why, some of them have been a joke for years, and not a very funny one. Characters have been destroyed, policies have been wrecked—why shouldn't a war be started? Because politicians can be relied on to act in a certain way. And maybe this outsider, having watched and studied us, knew something about Russian weaknesses too, and played on them in the same way. Do you see how easy it would be?"

"Easy?" I cried, offended.

"For someone with very special talents and ability," he assured me. "For a Fat Boy. Especially for a Fat Boy who can go, faster than any human can follow, from here to Moscow, Moscow to Paris, Paris to the Mojave, Mojave to — where? Somewhere near Mars, let's say at a guess. For such a person, wouldn't it be easy?"

I reeled, I reeled; but these monkey tricks, they could not matter. I had planned too carefully for that, only how did they know?

"Excuse me," I said softly, "one moment," and turned again to the room with the armchair. I felt I had made a mistake. But what mistake could matter, I thought, when there was the armchair and, of course, *z-z-z-z-zit?*

But that was a mistake also.

The man in blue coveralls, he stood in the door but not smilingly. He held in his hand what I knew instantly was a gun.

The armchair was there, yes, but

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in it was of all strange unaccountable people this chambermaid, who should have been bound in closet, and she too had a gun.

"Miss Gonzalez," introduced Hagsworth politely, "and Mr. Hechtmeyer. They are — well, G-men, though, as you can see, Miss Gonzalez is not a man. But she had something remarkable to tell us about you, when Mr. Hechtmeyer released her. She said that you seemed to have another shape when she saw you last. The shape of a sort of green-skinned octopus with bright red eyes. Ridiculous, isn't it? Or is it?"

Ruses were past. It was a time for candid. I said, *"Like this?"* terribly, and I went quick to natural form.

OH, what white faces! Oh, what horror! It was remarkable that they did not turn and run. For that is Secret Weapon No. 1, for us of Tau Ceti on sanitation work; for our working clothes we assume the shape of those about us, certainly, but in case of danger we have merely to resume our own. In all Galaxy (I do not know about Andromeda), there is no shape so fierce. Nine terrible arms. Fourteen piercing scarlet eyes. Teeth like Hessian bayonets. I ask you, would *you* not run?

But they did not. Outside, a siren began with great frightening-ness to scream.

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VI

I CRIED: "Air attack!" It was fearful, the siren warned of atomic warheads on their way and this human woman, this Gonzalez, sat in my chair with pointing gun.

"Go away," I cried, "get out," and rushed upon her, but she did not move.

"Please!" I said thickly among my long teeth, but what was the use? She would not do it!

They paled, they trembled, but they stayed. Well, I would have paled and trembled myself if it had been a Tau Cetan trait. Instead, I merely went limp. Terror was not only on one side in that room, I confess it.

"Please," I begged, "I must go. It is the end of life on this planet and I do not wish to be here!"

"You don't have a choice," said Mr. Hagsworth, his face like steel. "Gentlemen!" he called, "come in!"

And through the door came several persons, some soldiers and some who were not. I looked with all my eyes; I could not have been more astonished. For there was — yes, Senator Schnell, gold tooth covered, face without smile; Senator Loveless, white hair waving; and — oh, there was more.

I could scarcely believe.

Feeble, slow humans! They had mere atmosphere craft mostly, but here, eight thousand miles from where he had been eighteen hours

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before, yes, Comrade Tadjensevitch, the old man, and M. Duplessin, sadly meeting my eyes. It could not be. Almost I forgot the screaming siren and the fear.

"These gentlemen," said Hagsworth with polite, "also would like to talk to you, Mr. Smith."

"Arakelian," grunted the old man.

"Monsieur Laplant," corrected Duplessin.

"Or," said Hagsworth, "should we all call you by your right name?"

Outside, the siren screamed. I could not move.

"Please let me go!" I cried.

"Where?" demanded old Tadjensevitch. "To Mars, Hero of Soviet Labor? Or farther this time?"

"The bombs!" I cried. "Let me go! What about Hero of Soviet Labor?"

The old man sighed. "The decoration Comrade Party Secretary gave you, it contains a micro-wave transmitter, very good. One of our *sputniki* now needs new parts."

"You *suspected* me?" I cried out of fear and astonish.

"Of course the Russians suspected you, Plinglot," Hagsworth scolded mildly. "We all did, even we Americans — and we are not, you know, a suspicious race. No," he added thoughtfully, as though there were no bombs to fall, "our national characteristics are . . . what? The conventional caricatures — the publicity hound, the pork-barrel Senator, the cut-throat businessman? Would you say that was a fair picture, Mr. Smith?"

"I Plinglot!"

"Yes, of course. Sorry. But that must be what you thought, because those are the stereotypes you acted on, and maybe they're true enough — most of the time. Too much of the time. But not *all* the time, Plinglot!"

NOW I fell to floor, perspiring a terrible smell. It is how we faint, so to speak. It was death, it was the end, and this man was bullying me without fear.

"The Fat Boy," said Mr. Hagsworth softly, "was strong. He could have whipped most of us. But in my last term he got licked. Guile and bluff; when at last the bluff was called, he gave up. He was a coward."

"I give up, Mr. Hagsworth," I wailed, "only let me go away from the bombs!"

"I know you do," he nodded. "What else? And — what, the bombs? There are no bombs. Look out the window."

In seconds I pulled myself together, no one spoke. I went to window. Cruising up and down outside, a white truck, red cross, painted wtih word *Ambulance*, siren going. Only that. No air raid warning. Only one ambulance.

"Did you think," scolded Hagsworth with voice angry now, "that

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we would let *you* bluff *us*? There's an old maxim — 'Give a fool enough rope' — we gave it to you, and we added a little. You see, we didn't *know* you came from a race of cowards."

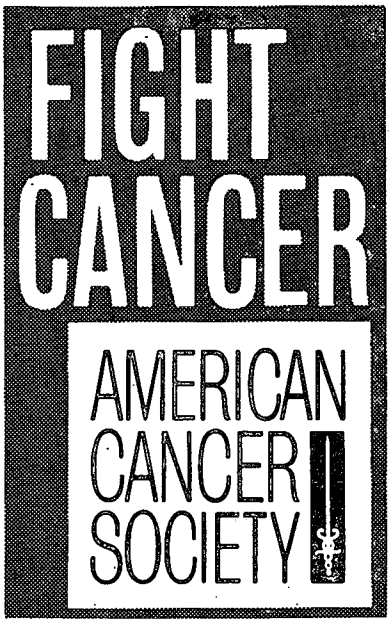
"I Plinglot!" I sobbed through all my teeth. "I am not a coward. I even tied this human woman here, ask her! It was brave, even Mother could not have done more! Why, I am the sector warden of this whole quadrant of Galaxy, indeed, to keep the peace!"

"That much we know — and we know why," nodded Hagsworth, "because you're afraid; but we needed to know more. Well, now we do, and once M. Duplessin's associates get a better means of communication with the little Aldebaranian, I expect we'll know still more. It will be very helpful knowledge," he added in thought.

It was all, it was the end. I said sadly: "If only Great Mother could know Plinglot did his best! If only she could learn what strange people live here, whom I cannot understand."

"Oh," said Mr. Hagsworth, gentle, "we'll tell her for you, Plinglot," he said. "Very soon, I think."

— **FREDERIK POHL**



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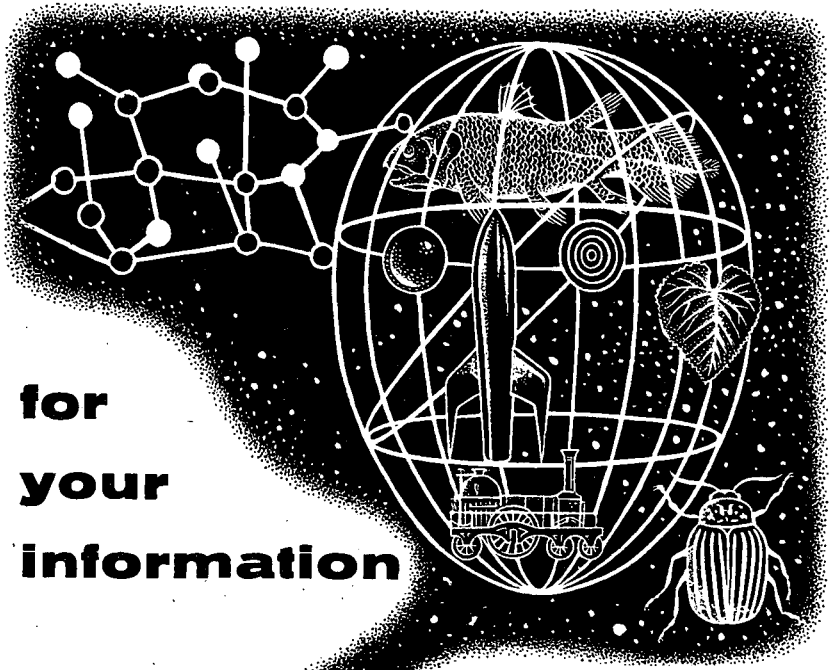

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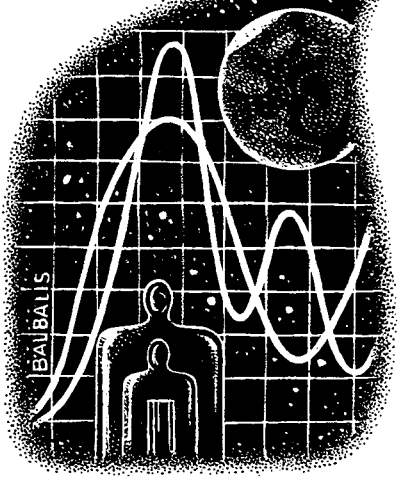

BY WILLY LEY

MONSTERS OF THE DEEP

FOR those who missed the December issue, it is necessary to give a condensed account of the fate of the deep sea during the nineteenth century. Or rather to the fate of the thoughts about the deep sea and to the events which changed these thoughts.

For the first two or three decades of the nineteenth century, it was thought—by those who thought about it at all — that the bottoms of all seas, from a certain depth

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on down, were covered with ice. Some temperature measurements had indicated that the temperature dropped as you went down in the ocean; logically, then, at one point it had to grow cold enough for the water to turn into ice.

This theory was superseded around 1843 by the Abyssal Theory of Edward Forbes who thought, as a result of studies he had made in the Mediterranean Sea, that life could not possibly exist below a depth of 300 fathoms. Of course the seas were deeper, but at 300 fathoms there began the "azoic zone," the lifeless area.

This idea was very swiftly and very thoroughly disproved. In 1850, Pastor Michael Sars, a Norwegian, found thriving life near the Lofoten Islands at 450 fathoms, and, soon after, life-forms from much greater depths were recovered for wholly practical reasons — a broken transatlantic cable was fished up in the Atlantic and another broken cable was fished up from the Mediterranean, both showing life-forms. Then Sir Wyville Thomas talked the British government into sending out expeditions for the purpose of exploring the bottom of the seas.

At first he was given two small Navy vessels, the *Lightning* and the *Porcupine,* for work around the British Isles and in the Mediterranean; then the corvette *Challenger* went around the world on

Illustrations drawn by Olga Ley, the first seven after the report of the *Valdivia* expedition, the other four from the book *The Galathea Deep Sea Expedition,* with kind permission of its publisher, the Macmillan Company, New York.

the same errand. It became a great scientific success and as a result Alexander Agassiz started exploring the seas off the United States, first the Gulf of Mexico, then the Caribbean Sea, then the nearby Atlantic, and finally the Pacific.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the Germans sent the *S.S. Valdivia* on a *Challenger*like expedition. Now this is about as far as I got last month, so we can pick up the narrative with the *Valdivia* expedition.

NATURALLY the German scientists, who, under the leadership of Professor Carl Chun, manned the *Valdivia,* had read all fifty quarto volumes which reported on the work of the *Challenger.* They knew what had been done wrong or awkwardly on that first try. New and better nets and other equipment had been designed and constructed in the meantime. Consequently the *Valdivia* expedition did as well as the *Challenger* expedition in a shorter time.

There was another improvement too. The *Challenger* expedition had lost over a dozen men,

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Fig. 1: Melanocetus johnsoni (left) and Melanocetus krechi (right)

not due to accidents but to heat prostration, tropical diseases and exhaustion. The *Valdivia* lost only one man — ironically, he was the ship's doctor.

Leaving Hamburg on July 31, 1898, the *Valdivia* first sailed to England—or, more precisely, Scotland, since they went to Edinburgh; then she sailed around Scotland and Ireland, took course due south for the Canary Islands and more or less followed the African coast. From Capetown, course was SSW for the purpose of finding Bouvet Island if they could (they did), then east to Enderby Land on the coast of Antarctica, from there up to Sumatra, then across the Indian Ocean to Dar-es-Salaam in East Africa, then north along the African coast to the Red

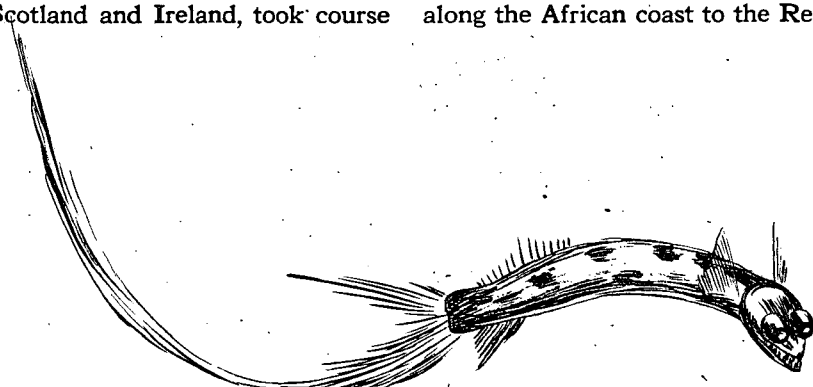

Fig. 2: Gigantura, fish with telescope eyes

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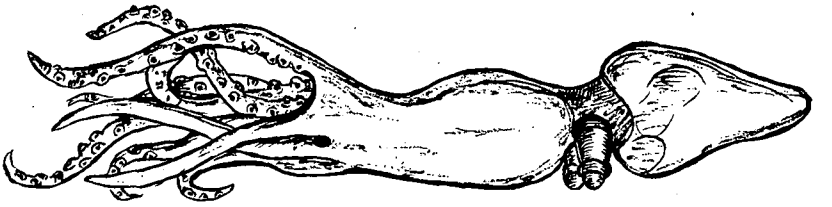

Fig. 3: Amphitretus, octopus with telescope eyes

Fig. 4: Deep-sea prawn Nematocarcinus

Sea. Then the *Valdivia* sailed the whole length of the Mediterranean Sea and around Spain back to Hamburg, which was reached on April 28, 1899.

A member of the expedition recalled later that one of the first questions asked of him by a newspaper reporter was: "Did you catch any monsters of the deep?" The scientist replied that they had caught monsters all right, but that the reporter would not agree, so let's call them bathypelagic fishes. To understand this exchange, it must be explained that the German word for monster is *Ungeheuer*, but the adjective *ungeheuerlich* mostly means "gigantic."

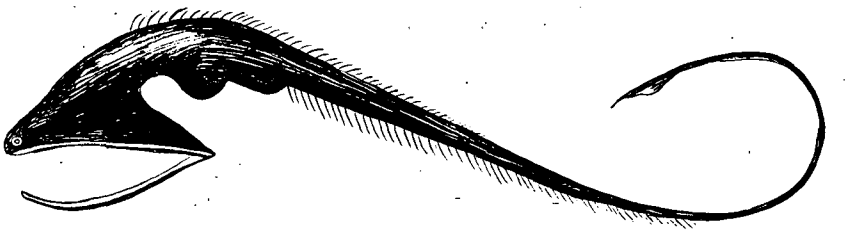

Fig. 5: Megalopharynx, actually larva of pelican eel

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They were "monsters," yes, but they were little. One of my childhood memories is myself standing in front of the displays in the Museum of Natural History in Berlin and marveling at the monsters. Why, they were all of so small a size that one could easily keep them in a fish tank at home! Building a fish tank which could actually do that would be a major engineering task. It would cost, I guess, around $15,000 and would still have the considerable disadvantage of not letting you see what's going on inside.

THERE were two small black misshapen fishes, each about three inches long (Fig. 1). Your first impression was that this was mainly a mouth. The teeth, though tiny, still looked both vicious and, strange to say, luminous. These two fishes, one taken in the Atlantic at a depth of 13,500 feet, the other in the Indian Ocean at a similar depth, had come up still alive and had lived on board the *Valdivia* for about an hour. They had been photographed in a dark room, and the teeth *had* been luminous, as had been the tip of the appendage growing out from between the eyes.

Less frightening and more impressive in many respects was *Gigantura* (Fig. 2) which was labeled as a large representative of the fish fauna of the deep sea. Its eellike body was 4¼ inches long and it had been taken from a depth of 8250 feet. The whole body was the most beautiful mother-of-pearl color on a pink background; the long trailing tail (six inches of it) looked like silver threads. And the eyes were of a shape that had never been seen before; they were like built-in opera glasses. The scientific designation, logically, was "telescope eyes."

Nor were these telescope eyes just an accomplishment of the fishes. Octopi had them too. There was a 4-inch octopus called *Amphitretus* which also had telescope eyes (Fig. 3). It was colorless and looked somewhat translucent. I can't tell whether this was its natural appearance or whether being preserved in alcohol had robbed it of what color it originally had. By the time I saw it, it had been in alcohol for some sixteen years and that, unfortunately, does cause bleaching.

The men of the *Valdivia* seem to have been generally somewhat more lucky than the men of the *Challenger* because they quite often could still have a quick look at the living deep-sea animals. True, the creatures died soon thereafter, but they were still seen alive. It must have been a difference of faster winches and general technical improvement in the catching equipment.

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AT any event, the men expressed their surprise at how colorful deep-sea life turned out to be. They probably had reasoned consciously that color did not matter in a permanently dark environment, and then had drawn the subconscious conclusion that the denizens of the extreme deep would therefore be black. Well, the conclusion had been wrong; the reasoning should have stopped with the statement that color does not matter in a permanently dark environment. So the animals had color, only it did not matter.

The fishes were mother-of-pearl color, or pink, or dark blue and *sometimes* black. The crabs, to everybody's surprise, were usually pink or red. This again was one of the cases where reasoning, in this case the surprise, was based on previous experience.

Even a zoologist, unless he happens to be working on marine crustaceans right at the time, is likely to think of edible crabs, of lobsters and crayfish, when the word "crustacean" is mentioned. All these are dark-colored when alive and it is just the fact that they have turned red that announces that they are ready to eat.

If you ask a zoologist why, he will readily explain that the color of the living lobster or crayfish is due to two pigments in the shell. One is blue, the other red. It so happens that the blue pigment is destroyed by heat (it does not dissolve in the cooking water, as you can sometimes read; if it did, the water would turn blue) so that only the heat-resistant red pigment is left. Hence the boiled crayfish and the broiled lobster are red.

After finishing this explanation, the same zoologist will even point out that one can occasionally find crayfish in which one or both pigments are missing. If both are missing, the crayfish looks dirty white, of course. If the red pigment is missing, it looks a rather beautiful light steel blue, and if the blue pigment is missing, the crayfish is pinkish red.

Well, yes, that is what the man *knows*. The occasional reddish living crayfish is an unusual case. So, when he sees a netful of red crabs and prawns break the surface of the ocean, he is still surprised because they are all red. He did not expect them to have the red pigment only. But they do.

It must be said that the zoologist, if he could spend some time at the bottom of the ocean, would not get used to red crabs and prawns either. If he were at the bottom of the Indian Ocean, where it is about 3500 feet deep, and sat perfectly still, he might see a red deep-sea prawn (*Nematocarcinus*) approach him. The picture would be something like Fig. 4. These crustaceans eject a luminous liquid, presumably to blind their enemies

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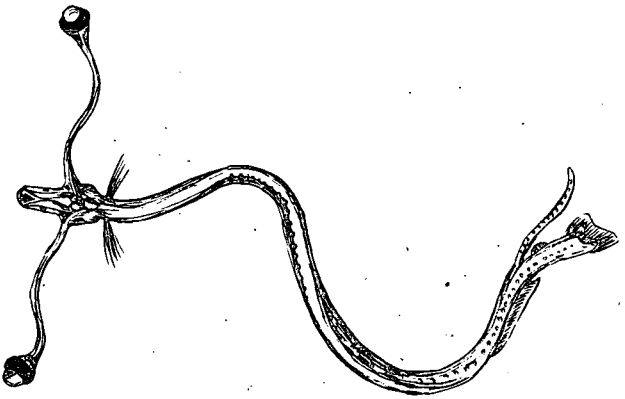

Fig. 6: Stylophthalmus, another deep-sea fish larva

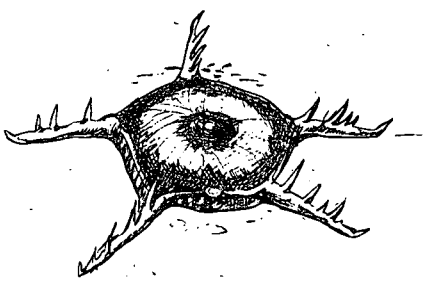

Fig. 7: Styracaster, abyssal seastar of wide distribution

when attacked, and it is reported that this liquid clings to their own bodies for a while. But in the light beam of a lamp, the crab would look red.

HOWEVER, this discussion has taken me away from the showcase at the Natural History Museum in Berlin where I spent much time in wonder when I was about twelve. There were two especially weird things in it. Again they proved that, in the deep sea, color does not matter, for one was dead black and the other mother of pearl.

The black one was *Megalopharynx longicaudatus*, which translates as the "long-tailed big-gullet" (Fig. 5); the name isn't very sophisticated, but you can't deny that it is descriptive. In size, the long-tailed big-gullet was considerable for its habitat, measuring 7½ inches in length. The scientists of the *Valdivia* were convinced that this was just the larval form of another fish and later discoveries proved them right. The adult is called the "pelican eel" (*Eurypharynx pelecanoides*) and is now known to occur in all oceans below the 3000-foot level.

The last monster in that showcase was tiny, just a shade longer than one inch. It bore the name of *Stylophthalmus Brauer* and had been caught in the Indian Ocean at a depth of 6600 feet (Fig. 6). It also was a larval form. Why its eyes are on such long stalks is not

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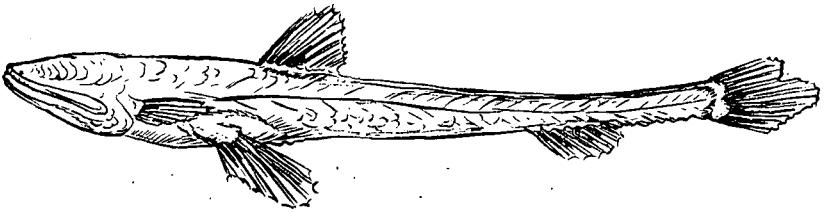

Fig. 8: Blind deep-sea fish Bathymicrops, of worldwide distribution

Fig. 9: A deep-sea holothurian, Scotoplanes, probably an inactive type

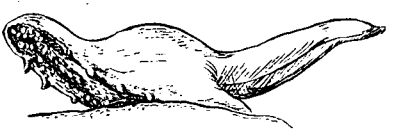

Fig. 10: Deep-sea holothurian Psychropotes, probably a very active type

known; larval forms do not always make sense even though one wishes they would.

It has just been mentioned that the pelican eel occurs in all oceans. Successive expeditions have tended to show that the fauna of the deep sea seems to be rather uniform, which, since the environment is rather uniform, is not really surprising. A fish caught in one ocean by one expedition at 4500 feet was caught by another expedition at 5000 feet in another ocean and by a third expedition at 3500 feet in still another ocean. The *Valdivia* itself provided different examples.

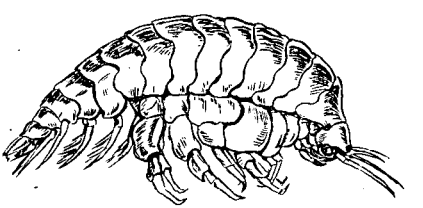

Fig. 11: Deep-sea crustacean Eurythenes gryllus, probably active type too

Nor is this uniformity restricted to what the German scientist called, in self-defense, the bathypelagic

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fishes. Nothing cuts an interview short like such a term, especially if you add that it cannot be translated into what reporters call "words of one syllable." (Incidentally, they are not consistent; one of them once said to me that he wanted my "reply in interesting words of one syllable, not those linguistic monstrosities you scientists always use"; please note that be used only eight one-syllable words in fifteen.) Actually any scientific term — with the possible exception of a few mathematical concepts — can be either translated or at least explained.

WHEN it comes to marine biology, the first concept is that of the "littoral zone." Originally this term was defined as the zone between high and low tide, but in the course of time this has been liberalized to mean shallow water near the shore, generally.

The opposite of littoral is pelagic (from Greek *pelagos,* meaning "of the sea") which means everything far from the shore, beyond the horizon as seen by a man at the seashore. Pelagic then is subdivided into *Nekton,* which is everything that actively swims around, whether shark, porpoise or herring, and *Plankton,* which is everything that drifts around. If it swims or drifts above 500 feet of depth, it is "epipelagic." If it swims or drifts deep down, it is "bathypelagic." If it either cannot or does not move, it is "benthal" or "benthic."

That the bathypelagic fauna is rather uniform is not too surprising, but the *Valdivia* found a similar uniformity of the benthal forms. Figure 7 shows the deep-sea seastar *Styracaster.* The one pictured was 2¾ inches across and was dredged up from the Atlantic from about 8000 feet. Another one just like it, but 6 inches across, was dredged from 17,000 feet in the Indian Ocean. Likewise crinoids (the *Valdivia* discovered several new species) were the same in widely separated areas. The same went for sponges.

There are, it should be explained, three main types of sponges. The best known of them, the bath sponge, is a representative of the "Horny Sponges." Its structure consists of spongin fibers. The second group are the calcareous sponges, and the third the glass sponges with a silica skeleton. The glass sponges are often very beautiful and have shapes that remind the observer of artifacts — many look like intricate vases or bottles.

Some of these glass sponges which had come on the market via Japan had actually been thought to be artificial and had been much admired as the product of Japanese glass blowers. To the best of my knowledge, the Japanese never had any special reputation as glass blowers, nor do I

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know where the Japanese got them. The *Valdivia* found these types, which had been thought artificial, in many places, always deep down, always alike, no matter how far apart they grew.

Naturally the *Valdivia* expedition was not the last of its kind. It was followed one year later by the Dutch *Siboga* expedition under Professor Max Weber. Then followed a Norwegian deep-sea expedition on a vessel which was named — what else? — the *Michael Sars*. There were American expeditions (*Albatross*), Danish expeditions on the ships *Dana I* and *Dana II* (these paid special attention to the life history of the common eel, still completely unknown as late as 1912), and finally the Danish *Galathea* expedition.

IN the meantime, the problem was attacked from an entirely different angle. Most of what the *Valdivia* had found was, by definition, benthic. It was either grown to the bottom, like those glass sponges, or else it was not likely to move far, like the seastars and even most of the fishes. Just how much bathypelagic life there actually was remained to be investigated, and the best way of doing it was to put a man in a position where he could observe it directly. I am, of course, speaking of William Beebe's bathysphere.

William Beebe and his assistants were the first men to actually see bathypelagic fishes in their natural habitat and they were surprised at how much of it there was. All I can do is to urge you to read William Beebe's *Half Mile Down* which was reprinted in 1951 and is still available.

Since I am recommending books, I'll go on and recommend equally strongly that you spend two or three hours with *The Galathea Deep Sea Expedition* (published last year by the Macmillan Company) which produced results every bit as interesting as those of the *Challenger* and the *Valdivia*.

The *Galathea* expedition (it took place during the years 1950-1952) confirmed the earlier impression that the bathypelagic fauna was of worldwide distribution. The fish *Bathymicrops* is an insignificant-looking small and blind fish, but it is widely distributed. It was caught in the North Atlantic 16,500 feet down by the *Michael Sars*, three times in the Atlantic by the *Albatross* (at 14,000 feet off Northwest Africa, at 18,000 feet in mid-Atlantic near the equator and at 17,000 feet near the North Coast of South America), and three times by the *Galathea* (at about 15,000 feet near the southern tip of Africa, at about 16,000 feet off the African East Coast near the equator, and at 19,300 feet just north of the

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North Island of New Zealand).

The route of the *Galathea* was similar to that of the *Valdivia*: from Copenhagen through the English Channel, down the West Coast of Africa, up the East Coast to the Seychelles Islands, across the Indian Ocean to Ceylon, then through the Sunda Sea to Australia, around New Zealand, up to Hawaii, then to San Francisco, from there to the Panama Canal and, cutting across the Atlantic, back to Copenhagen.

The *Galathea* secured a number of specimens of the invertebrate life of the abyssal regions which do not seem to belong to Earth. A deep-sea cucumber (*Scotoplanes*) measuring about 3¾ inches in length was found off the Philippines at 22,000 and at 33,000 feet. Probably it spends its life buried in the mud (Fig. 9).

An even more unusual-looking holothurian (sea cucumber, that is) was taken from about 18,000 feet from the bottom between the northern end of Madagascar and the African mainland. Eight specimens of *Psychropotes* (Fig. 10) were taken in one haul, the largest being a foot in length, the smallest eight inches. They probably plow through the ooze, hunting worms.

Fig. 11 shows a rather large crustacean (one of the so-called amphipods) taken by the *Galathea* in the Indian Ocean from depths up to 16,000 feet. This crustacean seems to be swimming some distance above the bottom as well as moving around on the bottom. It grows to a length of about four inches.

NOW, an even dozen expeditions after Michael Sars' first probing of the deep sea, we can make a few generalizations.

To begin with, no place in the deep sea, which, after all, covers about 60 per cent of the Earth's surface, is completely lifeless. In general, it seems that the life-forms are smaller the deeper you go, but some surprises in that respect are easily possible. So far, the areas which the *Challenger* men entered as "red ooze" on their charts seem to have the smallest number of inhabitants per square mile. The fauna of the deepest deep sea seems to be essentially benthic; apparently food is so scarce that obtaining it is largely accidental, so that it makes little difference whether the organism moves around actively searching for food or just lies in wait.

The absolutely sessile forms are too far down in the scale of evolution to have developed luminous organs, especially since a number of them, the sponges, are eyeless under any circumstances.

Crustaceans can, as has been mentioned, eject a luminous liquid. Luminous organs have been found, to the best of my knowledge, only

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on fishes and on octopi. In both cases, the animal seems to be able to control these organs, to be able to switch them on or off. Crustaceans and fishes, as well as octopi, have gone to both extremes as regards eyes. They either are completely blind or they have developed the largest eyes for their body size known to naturalists.

It appears that none of the forms inhabiting the deep sea originated there. They, or rather their ancestors, all seem to have migrated from higher layers.

The research work was determined at the beginning by the desire to find out how far life extended into the depth. It was only natural to investigate the sea bottom first, after it had been learned that there was something to investigate. The deep sea which is *not* near the bottom has been somewhat neglected by comparison. But we already know that it is richer in life than the bottom itself.

One is naturally tempted, at this point in history, to compare the deep sea to space. The comparison is easy. In both cases, we know it is there. In both cases, we know it is immense in extent. In both cases, we know there is something to investigate.

And, in both cases, we have to start any discussion with the words: "We have only just begun."

— WILLY LEY

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF

February 1958

GALAXY MAGAZINE, published Bi-Monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1958.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publisher* Robert M. Guinn, 421 Hudson St., New York 14, N. Y.; *Editor* H. L. Gold, 421 Hudson St., New York 14, N. Y.; *Managing Editor* None; *Business manager* None.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be given.)

Galaxy Publishing Corp., 421 Hudson St., New York 14, N.Y. Robert M. Guinn (Sole Stockholder), 421 Hudson St., New York 14, N. Y.

3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (*If there are none, so state.*)

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5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

ROBERT M. GUINN, *Publisher*

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1958.

Joan J. DeMario, Notary Public, State of New York, No. 24-5978800. Qualified in Kings County.

JOAN J. DeMARIO

(My commission expires March 30, 1960)

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Insidekick

By J. F. BONE

Johnson had two secrets — one he knew and would die rather than reveal — and one he didn't know that meant to save him over his own dead body!

Illustrated by WOOD

SHIFAZ glanced furtively around the room. Satisfied that it was empty except for Fred Kemmer and himself, he sidled up to the Earthman's desk and hissed conspiratorially in his ear, "Sir, this Johnson is a spy! Is it permitted to slay him?"

"It is permitted," Kemmer said in a tone suitable to the gravity of the occasion.

He watched humorlessly as the Antarian slithered out of the office with a flutter of colorful ceremonial robes. Both Kemmer and Shifaz had known for weeks that John-

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son was a spy, but the native had to go through this insane rigmarole before the rules on Antar would allow him to act. At any rate, the formalities were over at last and the affair should be satisfactorily ended before nightfall. Natives moved quickly enough, once the preliminaries were concluded.

Kemmer leaned back in his chair and sighed. Being the Interworld Corporation's local manager had more compensations than headaches, despite the rigid ritualism of native society. Since most of the local population was under his thumb, counter-espionage was miraculously effective. This fellow Johnson, for instance, had been in Vaornia less than three weeks, and despite the fact that he was an efficient and effective snoop, he had been fingered less than forty-eight hours after his arrival in the city.

Kemmer closed his eyes and let a smile cross his keen features. Under his administration, there would be a sharp rise in the mortality curve for spies detected in the Vaornia-Lagash-Timargh triangle. With the native judiciary firmly under IC control, the Corporation literally had a free hand, providing it kept its nose superficially clean. And as for spies, they knew the chances they took and what the penalty could be for interfering with the normal operations of corporate business.

Kemmer yawned. stretched, turned his attention to more important matters.

ALBERT Johnson fumbled hopefully in the empty food container before tossing it aside. A plump, prosaic man of middle height, with a round ingenuous face, Albert was as undistinguished as his name, a fact that made him an excellent investigator. But he was neither undistinguished nor unnoticed in his present position, although he had tried to carry it off by photographing the actions of the local Sanitary Processional like any tourist.

He had been waiting near the Vaornia Arm on the road that led to Lagash since early afternoon, and now it was nearly evening. He cursed mildly at the fact that the natives had no conception of time, a trait not exclusively Antarian, but one which was developed to a high degree on this benighted planet. And the fact that he was hungry didn't add to his good temper. Natives might be able to fast for a week without ill effects, but his chunky body demanded quantities of nourishment at regular intervals, and his stomach was protesting audibly at being empty.

He looked around him, at the rutted road, and at the darkening Vaornia Arm of the Devan Forest that bordered the roadway. The Sanitary Processional had com-

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pleted the daily ritual of waste disposal and the cart drivers and censer bearers were goading their patient daks into a faster gait. It wasn't healthy to be too near the forest after the sun went down. The night beasts weren't particular about what, or whom, they ate.

The Vaornese used the Vaornia Arm as a dump for the refuse of the city, a purpose admirably apt, for the ever-hungry forest life seldom left anything uneaten by morning. And since Antarian towns had elaborate rituals concerning the disposal of waste, together with a nonexistent sewage system, the native atttiude of fatalistic indifference to an occasional tourist or Antarian being gobbled up by some nightmare denizen of the forest was understandable.

The fact that the Arm was also an excellent place to dispose of an inconvenient body didn't occur to Albert until the three natives with knives detached themselves from the rear of the Sanitary Processional and advanced upon him. They came from three directions, effectively boxing him in, and Albert realized with a sick certainty that he had been double-crossed, that Shifaz, instead of being an informant for him, was working for the IC. Albert turned to face the nearest native, tensing his muscles for battle.

Then he saw the Zark.

It stepped out of the gathering darkness of the forest, and with its appearance everything stopped. For perhaps a micro-second, the three Vaornese stood frozen. Then, with a simultaneous wheep of terror, they turned and ran for the city.

They might have stayed and finished their work if they had known it was a Zark, but at the moment the Zark was energizing a toothy horror that Earthmen called a Bandersnatch — an insane combination of talons, teeth and snakelike neck mounted on a crocodilian body that exuded an odor of putrefaction from the carrion upon which it normally fed. The Bandersnatch had been dead for several hours, but neither the natives nor Albert knew that.

IT was a tribute to the Zark's ability to maintain pseudo-life in a Bandersnatch carcass that the knifemen fled and a similar panic seized the late travelers on the road. Albert stared with horrified fascination at the monstrosity for several seconds before he, too, fled. Any number of natives with knives were preferable to a Bandersnatch. He had hesitated only because he didn't possess the conditioned reflexes arising from generations of exposure to Antarian wildlife.

He was some twenty yards behind the rearmost native, and, though not designed for speed, was

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actually gaining upon the fellow, when his foot struck a loose cobblestone in the road. Arms flailing, legs pumping desperately to balance his toppling mass, Albert fought manfully against the forces of gravity and inertia.

He lost.

His head struck another upturned cobble. His body twitched once and then relaxed limply and unconscious upon the dusty road.

The Zark winced a little at the sight, certain that this curious creature had damaged itself seriously.

Filled with compassion, it started forward on the Bandersnatch's four walking legs, the grasping talons crossed on the breast in an attitude of prayer. The Zark wasn't certain what it could do, but perhaps it could help.

Albert was mercifully unconscious as it bent over him to inspect his prone body with a purple-lidded pineal eye that was blue with concern. The Zark noted the bruise upon his forehead and marked his regular breathing, and came to the correct conclusion that, whatever had happened, the biped was relatively undamaged. But the Zark didn't go away. It had never seen a human in its thousand-odd years of existence, which was not surprising since Earthmen had been on Antar less than a decade and Zarks seldom left the forest.

Albert began to stir before the Zark remembered its present condition. Not being a carnivore, it saw nothing appetizing about Albert, but it was energizing a Bandersnatch, and, like all Zarks, it was a purist. A living Bandersnatch would undoubtedly drool happily at the sight of such a tempting tidbit, so the Zark opened the three-foot jaws and drooled.

Albert chose this precise time to return to consciousness. He turned his head groggily and looked up into a double row of saw-edged teeth surmounted by a leering triangle of eyes. A drop of viscid drool splattered moistly on his forehead, and as the awful face above him bent closer to his own, he fainted.

The Zark snapped its jaws disapprovingly. This was not the proper attitude to take in the presence of a ferocious monster. One simply didn't go to sleep. One should attempt to run. The biped's act was utterly illogical. It needed investigation.

CURIOUSLY, the Zark sent out a pseudopod of its substance through the open mouth of its disguise. The faintly glittering thread oozed downward and struck Albert's head beside his right eye. Without pausing, the thread sank through skin and connective tissue, circled the eyeball and located the optic nerve. It raced inward along the nerve trunk, split at the

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optic chiasma, and entered the corpora quadrigemina where it branched into innumerable microscopic filaments that followed the main neural paths of the man's brain, probing the major areas of thought and reflex.

The Zark quivered with pleasure. The creature was beautifully complex, and, more important, untenanted. He would make an interesting host.

The Zark didn't hesitate. It needed a host; giving its present mass of organic matter pseudo-life took too much energy. The Bandersnatch collapsed with a faint slurping sound. A blob of iridescent jelly flowed from the mouth and spread itself evenly over Albert's body in a thin layer. The jelly shimmered, glowed, disappeared inward through Albert's clothing and skin, diffusing through the subcutaneous tissues, sending hairlike threads along nerve trunks and blood vessels until the threads met other threads and joined, and the Zark became a network of protoplasmic tendrils that ramified through Albert's body.

Immediately the Zark turned its attention to the task of adapting itself to its new host. Long ago it had learned that this had to be done quickly or the host did not survive. And since the tissues of this new host were considerably different from those of the Bandersnatch, a great number of structural and chemical changes had to be made quickly. With some dismay, the Zark realized that its own stores of energy would be insufficient for the task. It would have to borrow energy from the host — which was a poor way to start a symbiotic relationship. Ordinarily, one gave before taking.

Fortunately, Albert possessed considerable excess fat, an excellent source of energy whose removal would do no harm. There was plenty here for both Albert and itself. The man's body twitched and jerked as the Zark's protean cells passed through the adaptive process, and as the last leukocyte recoiled from tissue that had suddenly become normal, his consciousness returned. Less than ten minutes had passed, but they were enough. The Zark was safely in harmony with its new host.

Albert opened his eyes and looked wildly around. The landscape was empty of animate life except for the odorous carcass of the Bandersnatch lying beside him. Albert shivered, rose unsteadily to his feet and began walking toward Vaornia. That he didn't run was only because he couldn't.

He found it hard to believe that he was still alive. Yet a hurried inspection convinced him that there wasn't a tooth mark on him. It was a miracle that left him feeling vaguely uneasy. He wished he knew what had killed that grinning

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horror so opportunely. But then, on second thought, maybe it was better that he didn't know. There might be things in the Devan Forest worse than a Bandersnatch.

INSIDE the city walls, Vaornia struck a three-pronged blow at Albert's senses. Sight, hearing and smell were assaulted simultaneously. Natives slithered past, garbed in long robes of garish color. Sibilant voices cut through the evening air like thin-edged knives clashing against the grating screech of the ungreased wooden wheels of dak carts. Odors of smoke, cooking, spices, perfume and corruption mingled with the all-pervasive musky stench of unwashed Vaornese bodies.

It was old to Albert, but new and exciting to the Zark. Its taps on Albert's sense organs brought a flood of new sensation the Zark had never experienced. It marveled at the crowded buildings studded with jutting balconies and ornamental carvings. It stared at the dak caravans maneuvering with ponderous delicacy through the swarming crowds. It reveled in the colorful banners and awnings of the tiny shops lining the streets, and the fluttering robes of the natives. Color was something new to the Zark. Its previous hosts had been color blind, and the symbiont wallowed in an orgy of bright sensation.

If Albert could have tuned in on his fellow traveler's emotions, he probably would have laughed. For the Zark was behaving precisely like the rubbernecking tourist he himself was pretending to be. But Albert wasn't interested in the sights, sounds or smells, nor did the natives intrigue him. There was only one of them he cared to meet — that slimy doublecrosser called Shifaz who had nearly conned him into a one-way ticket.

Albert plowed heedlessly through the crowd, using his superior mass to remove natives from his path. By completely disregarding the code of conduct outlined by the IC travel bureau, he managed to make respectable progress toward the enormous covered area in the center of town that housed the Kazlak, or native marketplace. Shifaz had a stand there where he was employed as a tourist guide.

The Zark, meanwhile, was not idle despite the outside interests. The majority of its structure was busily engaged in checking and cataloguing the body of its host, an automatic process that didn't interfere with the purely intellectual one of enjoying the new sensations. Albert's body wasn't in too bad shape. A certain amount of repair work would have to be done, but despite the heavy padding of fat, the organs were in good working condition.

The Zark ruminated briefly

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over what actions it should take as it dissolved a milligram of cholesterol out of Albert's aorta and strengthened the weak spot in the blood vessel with a few cells of its own substance until Albert's tissues could fill the gap. Its knowledge of human physiology was incomplete, but it instinctively recognized abnormality. As a result, it could help the host's physical condition, which was a distinct satisfaction, for a Zark must be helpful.

SHIFAZ was at his regular stand, practicing his normal profession of guide. As Albert approached, he was in the midst of describing the attractions of the number two tour to a small knot of fascinated tourists.

"And then, in the center of the Kazlak, we will come to the Hall of the Brides — Antar's greatest marriage market. It has been arranged for you to actually see a mating auction in progress, but we must hurry or—" Shifaz looked up to see Albert shouldering the tourists aside. His yellow eyes widened and his hand darted to his girdle and came up with a knife.

The nearest tourists fell back in alarm as he hissed malevolently at Albert, "Stand back, Earthman, or I'll let the life out of your scaleless carcass!"

"Doublecrosser," Albert said, moving in. One meaty hand closed over the knife hand and wrenched while the other caught Shifaz alongside the head with a smack that sounded loud in the sudden quiet. Shifaz did a neat backflip and lay prostrate, the tip of his tail twitching reflexively.

One of the tourists screamed.

"No show today, folks," Albert said. "Shifaz has another engagement." He picked the Antarian up by a fold of his robe and shook him like a dirty dustcloth. A number of items cascaded out of hidden pockets, among which was an oiled-silk pouch. Albert dropped the native and picked up the pouch, opened it, sniffed, and nodded.

It fitted. Things were clearer now.

He was still nodding when two Earthmen in IC uniform stepped out of the crowd. "Sorry, sir," the bigger of the pair said, "but you have just committed a violation of the IC-Antar Compact. I'm afraid we'll have to take you in."

"This lizard tried to have me killed," Albert protested.

"I wouldn't know about that," the IC man said. "You've assaulted a native, and that's a crime. You'd better come peaceably with us — local justice is rather primitive and unpleasant."

"I'm an Earth citizen—" Albert began.

"This world is on a commercial treaty." The guard produced a

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blackjack and tapped the shot-filled leather in his palm. "It's our business to protect people like you from the natives, and if you insist, we'll use force."

"I don't insist, but I think you're being pretty high-handed."

"Your objection has been noted," the IC man said, "and will be included in the official report. Now come along or we'll be in the middle of a jurisdictional hassle when the native cops arrive. The corporation doesn't like hassles. They're bad for business."

THE two IC men herded him into a waiting ground car and drove away. It was all done very smoothly, quietly and efficiently. The guards were good.

And so was the local detention room. It was clean, modern and—Albert noted wryly — virtually escape-proof. Albert was something of an expert on jails, and the thick steel bars, the force lock, and the spy cell in the ceiling won his grudging respect.

He sighed and sat down on the cot which was the room's sole article of furniture. He had been a fool to let his anger get the better of him. IC would probably use this brush with Shifaz as an excuse to send him back to Earth as an undesirable tourist — which would be the end of his mission here, and a black mark on a singularly unspotted record.

Of course, they might not be so gentle with him if they knew that he knew they were growing tobacco. But he didn't think that they would know — and if they had checked his background, they would find that he was an investigator for the Revenue Service. Technically, criminal operations were not his affair. His field was tax evasion.

He didn't worry too much about the fact that Shifaz had tried to kill him. On primitive worlds like this, that was a standard procedure — it was less expensive to kill an agent than bribe him or pay honest taxes. He was angry with himself for allowing the native to trick him.

He shrugged. By all rules of the game, IC would now admit about a two per cent profit on their Antar operation rather than the four per cent loss they had claimed, and pay up like gentlemen — and he would get skinned by the Chief back at Earth Central for allowing IC to unmask him. His report on tobacco growing would be investigated, but with the sketchy information he possessed, his charges would be impossible to prove — and IC would have plenty of time to bury the evidence.

If Earth Central hadn't figured that the corporation owed it some billion megacredits in back taxes, he wouldn't be here. He had been dragged from his job in the Gen-

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eral Accounting Office, for every field man and ex-field man was needed to conduct the sweeping investigation. Every facet of the sprawling IC operation was being checked. Even minor and out-of-the-way spots like Antar were on the list — spots that normally demanded a cursory once-over by a second-class business technician.

SUPERFICIALLY, Antar had the dull unimportance of an early penetration. There were the usual trading posts, pilot plants, wholesale and retail trade, and tourist and recreation centers — all designed to accustom the native inhabitants to the presence of Earthmen and their works—and set them up for the commercial kill, after they had acquired a taste for the products of civilization. But although the total manpower and physical plant for a world of this size was right, its distribution was wrong.

A technician probably wouldn't see it, but to an agent who had dealt with corporate operations for nearly a quarter of a century, the setup felt wrong. It was not designed for maximum return. The Vaornia-Lagash-Timargh triangle held even more men and material then Prime Base. That didn't make sense. It was inefficient, and IC was not noted for inefficiency.

Not being oriented criminally, Albert found out IC's real reason for concentration in this area only by absent-mindedly lighting a cigarette one day in Vaornia. He had realized almost instantly that this was a gross breach of outworld ethics and had thrown the cigarette away. It landed between a pair of Vaornese walking by.

The two goggled at the cigarette, sniffed the smoke rising from it, and with simultaneous whistles of surprise bent over to pick it up. Their heads collided with some force. The cigarette tore in their greedy grasp as they hissed hatefully at each other for a moment, before turning hostile glares in his direction. From their expressions, they thought this was a low Earthie trick to rob them of their dignity. Then they stalked off, their neck scales ruffled in anger, shreds of the cigarette still clutched in their hands.

Even Albert couldn't miss the implications. His tossing the butt away had produced the same reaction as a deck of morphine on a group of human addicts. Since IC wouldn't corrupt a susceptible race with tobacco when there were much cheaper legal ways, the logical answer was that it wasn't expensive on this planet — which argued that Antar was being set up for plantation operations — in which case tobacco addiction was a necessary prerequisite and the concentration of IC population made sense.

Now tobacco, as any Earthman knew, was the only monopoly in the

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Confederation, and Earth had maintained that monopoly by treaty and by force, despite numerous efforts to break it. There were some good reasons for the policy, ranging all the way from vice control to taxable income, but the latter was by far the most important. The revenue supported a considerable section of Earth Central as well as the huge battle fleet that maintained peace and order along the spacelanes and between the worlds.

But a light-weight, high-profit item like tobacco was a constant temptation to any sharp operator who cared more for money than for law, and IC filled that definition perfectly. In the Tax Section's book, the Interworld Corporation was a corner-cutting, profit-grabbing chiseler. Its basic character had been the same for three centuries, despite all the complete turnovers in staff. Albert grinned wryly. The old-timers were right when they made corporations legal persons.

Cigarettes which cost five credits to produce and sold for as high as two hundred would always interest a crook, and, as a consequence, Earth Central was always investigating reports of illegal plantations. They were found and destroyed eventually, and the owners punished. But the catch lay in the word "eventually." And if the operator was a corporation, no regulatory agency in its right mind would dare apply the full punitive power of the law. In that direction lay political suicide, for nearly half the population of Earth got dividends or salaries from them.

That, of course, was the trouble with corporations. They invariably grew too big and too powerful. But to break them up as the Ancients did was to destroy their efficiency. What was really needed was a corporate conscience.

Albert chuckled. That was a nice unproductive thought.

FRED Kemmer received the news that Albert had been taken to detention with a philosophic calm that lasted for nearly half an hour. By morning, the man would be turned over to the Patrol in Prime Base. The Patrol would support the charge that Albert was an undesirable tourist and send him home to Earth.

But the philosophic calm departed with a frantic leap when Shifaz reported Johnson's inspection of the oiled-silk pouch. Raw tobacco was something that shouldn't be within a thousand parsects of Antar; its inference would be obvious even to an investigator interested only in tax revenues. Kemmer swore at the native. The entire operation would have to be aborted now and his dreams of promotion would vanish.

"It wasn't my supply," Shifaz

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protested. "I was carrying it down to Karas at the mating market. He demands a pack every time he puts a show on for your silly Earthie tourists."

"You should have concealed it better."

"How was I to know that chubby slob was coming back alive? And who'd have figured that he could handle me?"

"I've told you time and again that Earthmen are tough customers when they get mad, but you had to learn it the hard way. Now we're all in the soup. The Patrol doesn't like illicit tobacco planters. Tobacco is responsible for their pay."

"But he's still in your hands and he couldn't have had time to transmit his information," Shifaz said. "You can still kill him."

Kemmer's face cleared. Sure, that was it. Delay informing the Patrol and knock the snoop off. The operation and Kemmer's future were still safe. But it irked him that he had panicked instead of thinking. It just went to show how being involved in major crime ruined the judgment. He'd have Johnson fixed up with a nice hearty meal — and he'd see that it was delivered personally. At this late date, he couldn't afford the risk of trusting a subordinate.

Kemmer's glower became a smile. The snoop's dossier indicated that he liked to eat. He should die happy.

WITH a faint click, a loaded tray passed through a slot in the rear wall of Albert Johnson's cell.

The sight and smell of Earthly cooking reminded him that he hadn't anything to eat for hours. His mouth watered as he lifted the tray and carried it to the cot. At least IC wasn't going to let him starve to death, and if this was any indication of the way they treated prisoners, an IC jail was the best place to be on this whole planet.

Since it takes a little time for substances to diffuse across the intestinal epithelium and enter the circulation, the Zark had some warning of what was about to happen from the behavior of the epithelial cells lining Albert's gut. As a result, a considerable amount of the alkaloid was stopped before it entered Albert's body — but some did pass through, for the Zark was not omnipotent.

For nearly five minutes after finishing the meal, Albert felt normally full and comfortable. Then hell broke loose. Most of the food came back with explosive violence and cramps bent him double. The Zark turned to the neutralization and elimination of the poison. Absorptive surfaces were sealed off, body fluids poured into the intestinal tract, and anti-substances formed out of Albert's energy reserve to neutralize whatever alkaloid remained.

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None of the Zark's protective measures were normal to Albert's body, and with the abrupt depletion of blood glucose to supply the energy the Zark required, Albert passed into hypoglycemic shock. The Zark regretted that, but it had no time to utilize his other less readily available energy sources. In fact, there was no time for anything except the most elemental protective measures. Consequently the convulsions, tachycardia, and coma had to be ignored.

Albert's spasms were mercifully short, but when the Zark was finished, he lay unconscious on the floor, his body twitching with incoordinate spasms, while a frightened guard called in an alarm to the medics.

The Zark quivered with its own particular brand of nausea. It had not been hurt by the alkaloid, but the pain of its host left it sick with self-loathing. That it had established itself in a life-form that casually ingested deadly poisons was no excuse. It should have been more alert, more sensitive to the host's deficiencies. It had saved his life, which was some compensation, and there was much that could be done in the way of restorative and corrective measures that would prevent such a thing from occurring again — but the Zark was unhappy as it set about helping Albert's liver metabolize fat to glucose and restore blood sugar levels.

THE medic was puzzled. She had seen some peculiar conditions at this station, but hypoglycemic shock was something new. And, being unsure of herself, she ordered Albert into the infirmary for observation. The guard, of course, didn't object, and Kemmer, when he heard of it, could only grind his teeth in frustration. He was on delicate enough ground without making it worse by not taking adequate precautions to preserve the health of his unwilling guest. Somehow that infernal snoop had escaped again. . . .

Albert moved his head with infinite labor and looked at the intravenous apparatus dripping a colorless solution into the vein in the elbow joint of his extended left arm. He felt no pain, but his physical weakness was appalling. He could move only with the greatest effort, and the slightest exertion left him dizzy and breathless. It was obvious that he had been poisoned, and that it was a miracle of providence that he had survived. It was equally obvious that a reappraisal of his position was in order. Someone far higher up the ladder than Shifaz was responsible for this latest attempt on his life. The native couldn't possibly have reached him in the safety of IC's jail.

The implications were unpleasant. Someone important feared him enough to want him dead, which meant that his knowledge of illicit

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tobacco was not as secret as he thought. It would be suicide to stay in the hands of the IC any longer. Somehow he had to get out and inform the Patrol.

He looked at the intravenous drip despondently. If the solution was poisoned, there was no help for him. It was already half gone. But he didn't feel too bad, outside of being weak. It probably was all right. In any event, he would have to take it. The condition of his body wouldn't permit anything else.

He sighed and relaxed on the bed, aware of the drowsiness that was creeping over him. When he awoke, he would do something about this situation, but he was sleepy now.

ALBERT awoke strong and refreshed. He was as hungry as he always was before breakfast. Whatever was in that solution, it had certainly worked miracles. As far as he could judge, he was completely normal.

The medic was surprised to find him sitting up when she made her morning rounds. It was amazing, but this case was amazing in more ways than one. Last night he had been in a state of complete collapse, and now he was well on the road to recovery.

Albert looked at her curiously. "What was in that stuff you gave me?"

"Just dextrose and saline," she said. "I couldn't find anything wrong with you except hypoglycemia and dehydration, so I treated that." She paused and eyed him with a curiosity equal to his own. "Just what do you think happened?" she asked.

"I think I was poisoned."

"That's impossible."

"Possibly," Albert conceded, "but it might be an idea to check that food I left all over the cell."

"That was cleaned up hours ago."

"Convenient, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you mean by that," she said. "Someone in the kitchens might have made a mistake. Yet you were the only case." She looked thoughtful. "I think I will do a little checking in the Central Kitchen, just to be on the safe side." She smiled a bright professional smile. "Anyway, I'm glad to see that you have recovered so well. I'm sure you can go back tomorrow."

She vanished through the door with a rustle of white dacron. Albert, after listening a moment to make sure that she was gone, rose to his feet and began an inspection of his room.

It wasn't a jail cell. Not quite. But it wasn't designed for easy escape, either. It was on the top floor of the IC building, a good hundred feet down to the street below. The window was covered with a steel grating and the door was locked. But both window and

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door were designed to hold a sick man rather than a healthy and desperate one.

Albert looked out of the window. The building was constructed to harmonize with native structures surrounding it, so the outer walls were studded with protuberances and bosses that would give adequate handholds to a man strong enough to brave the terrors of the descent.

Looking down the wall, Albert wavered. Thinking back, he made up his mind.

FRED KEMMER was disturbed. By all the rules, Albert Johnson should be dead. But Shifaz had failed, and that fool guard *had* to call in the medics. It was going to be harder to get at Johnson, now that he was in the infirmary, but he had to be reached.

One might buy off an agent who was merely checking on tax evasion, but tobacco was another matter entirely. Kemmer wished he hadn't agreed to boss Operation Weed. The glowing dreams of promotion and fortune were beginning to yellow around the edges. Visions of the Penal Colony bothered him, for if the operation went sour, he would do the paying. He had known that when he took the job, but the possibility seemed remote then.

He shook his head. It wasn't that bad yet. As long as Johnson hadn't communicated with anyone else and as long as he was still in company hands, something could be done.

Kemmer thought a while, trying to put himself in Johnson's place. Undoubtedly the spy was frightened, and undoubtedly he would try to escape. And since it would be far easier to escape from the infirmary than it would be from detention, he would try as soon as possible.

Kemmer's face cleared. If Johnson tried it, he would find it wasn't as easy as he thought.

With characteristic swiftness, Kemmer outlined his plans and made the necessary arrangements. A guard was posted in the hall with orders to shoot if Johnson tried the door of his room, and Kemmer himself took a stand in the building across the street, facing the hospital, where he could watch the window of Albert's room. As he figured it, the window was the best bet. He stroked the long-barreled blaster lying beside him. Johnson still hadn't a chance, but these delays in disposing of him were becoming an annoyance.

Cautiously, Albert tried the grating that covered the window. The Antarean climate had rusted the heavy screws that fastened it to the casing. One of the bars was loose. If it could be removed, it would serve as a lever to pry out the entire grating.

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Albert twisted at the bar. It groaned and squealed. He nervously applied more pressure, and the bar moved slowly out of its fastenings.

THE Zark observed his actions curiously. Now why was its host twisting that rod of metal out of the woodwork? It didn't know, and it was consumed with curiosity. It had found no way to communicate with its host so that some of the man's queer actions could be understood; in the portions of the brain it had explored, there were no portals of communication. However, there still was a large dormant portion, and perhaps here lay the thing it sought. The Zark inserted a number of tendrils into the blank areas, probing, connecting synapses, opening unused pathways, looking for what it hoped existed.

The results of this action were completely unforeseen by the Zark, for it was essentially just a subordinate ego with all the lacks which that implied — and it had never before inhabited a body that possessed a potentially first-class brain. With no prior experience to draw upon, the Zark couldn't possibly guess that its actions would result in a peculiar relationship between the man and the world around him. And if the Zark had known, it probably wouldn't have cared.

Albert removed the bar and pried out the grating. With only a momentary hesitation, he lowered himself over the sill until his feet struck an ornamental knob on the wall. He glanced quickly down. There was another protuberance about two feet below the one on which he was standing. Pressing against the wall, he inched one foot downward until it found the foothold. With relief, he shifted his weight to the lower foot, and as he did a wave of heat enveloped his legs. The protuberance came loose from the wall with a grating noise mixed with the crackling hiss of a blaster bolt, and Albert plunged toward the street below.

As the pavement rushed at him, he had time for a brief, fervent wish that he were someplace else. Then the thought was swallowed in an icy blackness.

FRED KEMMER lowered the blaster with a grin of satisfaction. He had figured his man correctly, and now the spy would be nothing to worry about. He watched the plummeting body — and gasped with consternation, for less than ten feet above the pavement, Albert abruptly vanished!

There is such a thing as too much surprise, too much shock, too much amazement. And that precisely was what affected Albert when he found himself standing on the street where the IC guards had picked him up. By rights, he should have been a

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pulpy smear against the pavement beneath the infirmary window. But he was not. He didn't question why he was here, or consider how he had managed to avoid the certain death that waited for him. The fact was that he had done it, somehow. And that was enough.

It was almost like history repeating itself. Shifaz was at his usual stand haranguing another group of tourists. It was the same spiel as before, and almost at the same point of the pitch. But his actions upon seeing Albert were entirely different. His eyes widened, but this time he slid quietly from his perch on the cornerstone of the building and disappeared into the milling crowd.

Albert followed. The fact that Shifaz was somewhere in that crowd was enough to start him moving, and, once started, stubbornness kept him going, plowing irresistibly through the thick swarm of Vaornese. Reason told him that no Earthman could expect to find a native hidden among hundreds of his own kind. Their bipedal dinosaurlike figures seemed to be cast out of one mold.

A chase through this crowd was futile, but he went on deeper into the Kazlak, drawn along an invisible trail by some unearthly sense that told him he was right. He was as certain of it as that his name was Albert Johnson. And when he finally cornered Shifaz in a deserted alley, he was the one who was not surprised.

Shifaz squawked and darted toward Albert, a knife glittering in his hand. Albert felt a stinging pain across the muscles of his left arm as he blocked the thrust aimed at his belly, wrenched the knife from the native's grasp, and slammed him to the pavement.

Shifaz bounced like a rubber ball, but he had no chance against the bigger and stronger Earthman. Albert knocked him down again. This time the native didn't rise. He lay in the street, a trickle of blood oozing from the corner of his lipless mouth, hate radiating from him in palpable waves.

Albert stood over him, panting a little from the brief but violent scuffle. "Now, Shifaz, you're going to tell me things," he said heavily.

"You can go to your Place of Punishment," Shifaz snarled. "I shall say nothing."

"I can beat the answers out of you," Albert mused aloud, "but I won't. I'll just ask you questions, and every time I don't like your answer, I'll kick one of your teeth out. If you don't answer, I guarantee that you'll look like an old grandmother."

SHIFAZ turned a paler green. To lose one's teeth was a punishment reserved only for females. He would be a thing of mockery and laughter — but there were

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worse things than losing teeth or face. There was such a thing as losing one's life, and he knew what would happen if he betrayed IC. Then he brightened. He could always lie, and this hulking brute of an Earthman wouldn't know — couldn't possibly know. So he nodded with a touch of artistic reluctance. "All right," he said, "I'll talk." He injected a note of fear into his voice. It wasn't hard to do.

"Where did you get that tobacco?" Albert asked.

"From a farm," Shifaz said. That was the truth. The Earthman probably knew about tobacco and there was no need to lie, yet.

"Where is it?"

Shifaz thought quickly of the clearing in the forest south of Lagash where the green broad-leaved plants were grown, and said, "It's just outside of Timargh, along the road which runs south." He waited tensely for Albert's reaction, wincing as the Earthman drew his foot back. Timargh was a good fifty miles from Lagash, and if this lie went over, he felt that he could proceed with confidence.

It went over. Albert replaced his foot on the ground. "You telling the truth?"

"As Murgh is my witness," Shifaz said with sincerity.

Albert nodded and Shifaz relaxed with hidden relief. Apparently the man knew that Murgh was the most sacred and respected deity in the pantheon of Antar, and that oaths based upon his name were inviolable. But what the scaleless oaf didn't know was that this applied to Antarians only. As far as these strangers from another world were concerned, anything went.

So Albert continued questioning, and Shifaz answered, sometimes readily, sometimes reluctantly, telling the truth when it wasn't harmful, lying when necessary. The native's brain was fertile and the tissue of lies and truth hung together well, and Albert seemed satisfied. At any rate, he finally went away, leaving behind a softly whistling Vaornese who congratulated himself on the fact that he had once more imposed upon this outlander's credulity. He was so easy to fool that it was almost a crime to do it.

But he wouldn't have been so pleased with himself if he could have seen the inside of Albert's mind. For Albert knew the truth about the four-hundred-acre farm south of Lagash. He knew about the hidden curing sheds and processing plant. He knew that both Vaornese and Lagashites were deeply involved in something they called Operation Weed, and approved of it thoroughly either from sheer cussedness or addiction. He had quietly read the native's mind while the half-truths and lies had

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fallen from his forked tongue. And, catching Shifaz's last thought, Albert couldn't help chuckling.

At one of the larger intersections, Albert stopped under a flaming cresset and looked at his arm. There was a wide red stain that looked black against the whiteness of his pajamas. That much blood meant more than a scratch, even though there was no pain — and cuts on this world could be deadly if they weren't attended to promptly.

He suddenly felt alone and helpless, wishing desperately for a quiet place where he could dress his wound and be safe from the eyes he knew were inspecting him. He was too conspicuous. The pajamas were out of place on the street. Undoubtedly natives were hurrying to report him to the IC.

His mind turned to his room in the hostel with its well-fitted wardrobe and its first-aid kit — and again came that instant of utter darkness — and then he was standing in the middle of his room facing the wardrobe that held his clothing.

HE felt no surprise this time. He knew what had happened. Something within his body was acting like a tiny Distorter, transporting him through hyperspace in the same manner that a starship's engine room warped it through the folds of the normal space-time continuum. There was nothing really strange about it. It was a power which he *should* have — which any normal man should have. The fact that he didn't have it before was of no consequence, and the fact that other men didn't have it now merely made *them* abnormal.

He smiled as he considered the possibilities which these new powers gave him. They were enormous. At the very least, they tripled his value as an agent. Nothing was safe from his investigation. The most secret hiding places were open to his probings. Nothing could stop him, for command of hyperspace made a mockery of material barriers.

He chuckled happily as he removed his pajama jacket and reached for the first-aid kit. From the gash in his sleeve, there should be a nasty cut underneath, and it startled him a little that there was no greater amount of hemorrhage. He cleaned off the dried blood — and found nothing underneath except a thin red bloodless line that ran halfway around his arm. It wasn't even a scratch.

Yet he had felt Shifaz' blade slice into his flesh. He knew there was more damage than this. The blood and the slashed sleeve could tell him that, even if he didn't have the messages of his nerves. Yet now there was no pain, and the closed scratch certainly wasn't the major wound he had expected.

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And this *was* queer, a fact for which he had no explanation. Albert frowned. Maybe this was another facet of the psi factors that had suddenly become his.

He wondered where they had come from. Without warning, he had become able to read minds with accuracy and do an effective job of teleportation. About the only things he lacked to be a well-rounded psi were telekinetic powers and precognition.

His frown froze on his face as he became conscious of a sense of unease. They were coming down the hall — two IC guardsmen. He caught the doubt and certainty in their minds — doubt that he would be in his room, certainty that he would be ultimately caught, for on Antar there was no place for an Earthman to hide.

Albert slipped into the first suit that came to hand, blessing the seam tabs that made dressing a moment's work. As the guards opened the door, he visualized the spot on the Lagash road where he had encountered the Bandersnatch. It was easier than before. He was standing in the middle of the road, the center of the surprised attention of a few travelers, when the guards entered his room.

THE bright light of Antar's golden day came down from a cloudless yellow sky. In the forest strip ahead, Albert could hear a faint medley of coughs, grunts and snarls as the lesser beasts fed upon the remains of yesterday's garbage. Albert moved down the road, ignoring the startled natives. This time he wasn't afraid of meeting a Bandersnatch or anything else, for he had a method of escape that was foolproof. Lagash was some thirty miles ahead, but in the lighter gravity of Antar, the walk would be stimulating rather than exhausting.

He went at a steady pace, occasionally turning his glance to the road, impressing sections of it upon his memory so that he could return to them via teleport if necessary. He found that he could memorize with perfect ease. Even the positions of clumps of grass and twigs were remembered with perfect clarity and in minute detail. The perfection of his memory astonished and delighted him.

The Zark felt pleased with itself. Although it had never dreamed of the potential contained in the host's mind, it realized that it was responsible for the release of these weird powers, and it enjoyed the new sensations and was eager for more. If partial probing could achieve so much, what was the ultimate power of this remarkable mind? The Zark didn't know, but, like a true experimenter, it was determined to find out — so it probed deeper, opening still more pathways and connecting more

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synapses with the conscious brain.

It was routine work that could be performed automatically while the rest of the Zark enjoyed the colorful beauty of the Antarian scenery.

With the forest quickly left behind him, Albert walked through gently rolling grassland dotted with small farms and homesteads. It was a peaceful scene, similar to many he had seen on Earth, and the familiarity brought a sense of nostalgic longing to be home again. But the feeling was not too strong, more intellectual than physical, for the memories of Earth were oddly blurred.

Time passed and the road unreeled behind him. Once he took to the underbrush to let a humming IC ground car pass, and twice more he hid as airboats swept by overhead, but the annoyances were minor and unimportant.

When hiding from the second airboat, he disturbed a kelit in the thick brush growing beside the road. The little insect-eater chittered in alarm and dashed off to safety across the highway. And Albert, looking at it, was conscious not only of the external shape but the internal as well!

He could see its little heart pounding in its chest, and the pumping bellows of the pink lungs that surrounded it. He was aware of the muscles pulling and relaxing as the kelit ran, and the long bones sliding in their lubricated joints. He saw the tenseness of the abdominal organs, felt the blind fear in the creature's mind. The totality of his impressions washed through him with a clear wave of icy shock.

GRIMLY, he shrugged it off. He had ESP. He ought to have expected it — it was the next logical step. He scrambled back to the road and walked onward a little faster, until the battlements of Lagash came in sight.

The Lagash Arm was farther from the city than was that of Vaornia, and as he came to the strip of jungle, he turned his eyes upon the empty parklike arcades between the trees. The last edible garbage had long since been consumed and the greater and lesser beasts had departed for the cooler depths of the forest, but Albert was conscious of life. It was all around him, in the trees with the ringed layers of their trunks and the sap flowing slowly upward through the cambium layer beneath their scaly bark, in the insects feeding upon the nectar of the aerial vine blossoms, in the rapid photosynthetic reactions of the leaves.

His gaze, turning aloft, was conscious of the birds and the tiny arboreal mammals. He saw the whole forest with eyes filled with wonder at its life and beauty. It

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was the only right way to see.

At the proper distance from Lagash, he plunged off boldly across country and entered the main area of the forest, reflecting wryly as he did so that he was probably the first human in the short history of Antarian exploration who had gone into one of the great forests with absolute knowledge that he would come out of it alive. And, as so often happens to men who have no fear, trouble avoided him.

He followed the directions he had obtained from Shifaz and found the plantation without trouble. He could hardly miss it, because its size was far from accurately expressed in the native's memory. Skillfully concealed beneath an overhanging network of aerial vines whose camouflage made it invisible from the air, concealing the tobacco plants from casual detector search, the plantation extended in row upon narrow row, the irregular strips of fields separated by rows of trees from which the camouflage was hung. A fragile electric fence encircled the area, a seemingly weak defense, but one through which even the greatest Antarian beast would not attempt to pass.

Albert whistled softly under his breath at what he saw, recorded it in his memory. Then, having finished the eyewitness part of his task, he recalled a section of road over which he had passed, and pushed.

The return journey to Vaornia was experimental in nature, as Albert tried the range of his powers. His best was just short of twenty miles and the journey which had taken him eight hours was made back in somewhat less than twenty minutes, counting half a dozen delays and backtracks.

THERE was no question about where Albert would go next. He had to get evidence, and that evidence lay in only one place — in the local office of the Interworld Corporation in Vaornia.

A moment later, he stood in the reception room looking across the empty desks at the bright square of light shining through the glassite paneled door of Fred Kemmer's office. It was past closing hours, but Kemmer had a right to be working late. Right now, he was probably sweating blood at the thought of what would happen if Albert had finally managed to escape him. The Corporation would virtuously disown him and leave him to face a ten-year rap in Penal Colony. Albert almost felt sorry for him.

Albert let his perception sense travel through the wall and into Kemmer's room. His guess was right—the local boss was sweating.

He checked Kemmer's office swiftly, but the only thing that

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interested him was the big vault beside the desk. He visualized the interior of the vault and pushed himself inside. Separated from Kemmer by six inches of the hardest metal known to Man, he quietly leafed through the files of confidential correspondence until he found what he wanted. He didn't need a light. His perception worked as well in the dark as in the daylight.

There was enough documentary evidence in the big vault to indict quite a few more IC officials than Kemmer — and perhaps investigation of *their* files would provide more leads to even higher officials. Wherever Kemmer was going, Albert had the idea that he wouldn't be going alone.

Albert selected all the incriminating letters and documents he could find and packed the microfiles in his jacket. Finally, bulging with documentary information, he pushed back into the streets.

It was late enough for few natives to be on the streets, and his appearance caused no comment. Apparently unnoticed, he moved rapidly into the Kazlak, searching for a place to hide the papers he had stolen. What he had learned of Vaornia made him cautious. He checked constantly for spies, but there wasn't a native in sensing range.

He ducked into the alleyway where he had caught Shifaz. His memory of it had been right. There was a small hole in one of the building walls, partly covered with cracked plaster, and barely visible in the darkness. The gloom of the Kazlak scarcely varied with night or day, as the enormous labyrinth of covered passages and building walls was pierced with only a few ventilation holes. Cressets at the main intersections burned constantly, their smokeless flames lighting the streets poorly.

He wondered idly how he had managed to remember the way to this place, let alone the little hole in the wall, as he stuffed the micro-files into its dark interior. He finished, turned to leave, and was out on the main tunnel before he became aware of the IC ground cars closing in upon him.

The Corporation was really on the beam, their spies everywhere. But they didn't know his abilities. He visualized and pushed. They were going to be surprised when he vanished — but he didn't vanish.

The expression of shocked surprise was still on his face as the stat gun blast took him squarely in the chest.

HE was tied to a chair in Fred Kemmer's office. He recognized it easily, although physically he had never been inside the room. His head hurt as a polygraph recorder was strapped to his left

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arm, and behind him, beyond his range of vision, he could sense another man and several machines. In front of him stood Fred Kemmer with an expression of satisfaction on his face.

"Don't start thinking you're smart," Kemmer said. "You're in no position for it."

"You've tried to kill me three times," Albert reminded him.

"There's always a fourth time."

"I don't think so. Too many people know."

"Precisely my own conclusion," Kemmer said, "but there are other ways. Brainwashing's a good one."

"That's illegal!" Albert protested. "Besides—"

"So what?" Kemmer cut him off. "It's an illegal universe."

Albert probed urgently at the IC man's mind, hoping to find something he could turn to his advantage, but all he found were surface thoughts — satisfaction at having gotten the spy where he could do no harm, plans for turning Albert into a mindless idiot, thoughts of extracting information — all of which had an air of certainty that was unnerving. Albert had badly underestimated him. It was high time to leave here, if he could.

Albert visualized an area outside Vaornia, and, as he tried to push, a machine hummed loudly behind him. He didn't move. Mistake, Albert thought worriedly, I'm not going anywhere — and he knows I'm scared.

"It won't do you any good," Kemmer said. "It didn't take too much brains to figure you were using hyperspace in those disappearing acts. There's an insulating field around that chair that'd stop a space yacht." He leaned forward. "Now — what are your contacts, and who gave you the information on where to look?"

Albert saw no reason to hide it, but there was no sense in revealing anything. The Patrol had word of his arrest by now and should be here any moment.

It was as though Kemmer had read his mind. "Don't count on being rescued. I stopped the Patrol report." Kemmer paused, obviously enjoying the expression on Albert's face. "You know," he went on, "there's a peculiar fact about nerves that maybe you don't know. A stimulus sets up a brief neural volley lasting about a hundredth of a second. Following that comes a period of refractivity lasting perhaps a tenth of that time while the nerve repolarizes, and then, immediately after repolarization, there is an extremely short period of hypersensitivity."

"What's that to do with me?" Albert asked.

"You'll find out if you don't answer promptly and truthfully. That gadget on your arm is connected to a polygraph. Now do

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you want to make a statement?"

Albert shook his head. He was conscious of a brief pain in one finger, and the next instant someone tore the finger out of his hand with red hot pincers. He screamed. He couldn't help it. This punishment was beyond agony.

"Nice, isn't it?" Kemmer asked as Albert looked down at his amputated finger that still was remarkably attached to his hand. "And the beauty of it is that it doesn't even leave a mark. Of course, if it's repeated enough, it will end up as a permanent paralysis of the part stimulated. Now once again — who gave you that information?"

ALBERT talked. It was futile to try to deceive a polygraph and he wanted no more of that nerve treatment — and then he looked into Kemmer's mind again and discovered what went into brainwashing. The shock was like ice water. Hypersensitive stimulation, Kemmer was thinking gleefully, would reduce this fat slob in the chair to a screaming mindless lump that could be molded like wet putty.

Albert felt helpless. He couldn't run and he couldn't fight. But he wasn't ready to give up. His perception passed over and through Kemmer with microscopic care, looking for some weakness, something that could be exploited to advantage. Kemmer *had* to have a vulnerable point.

He did.

There was a spot on the inner lining of the radial vein in Kemmer's left arm. He had recently received an inoculation, one of the constant immunizing injections that were necessary on Antar, for there was a small thrombus clinging to the needle puncture on the inner wall of the vessel. Normally it was unimportant and would pass away in time and be absorbed, but there were considerable possibilities for trouble in that little blob of red cells and fibrin if they could be loosened from their attachment to the wall.

Hopefully, Albert reached out. If he couldn't move himself, perhaps he could move the clot.

The thrombus stirred and came free, rushing toward Kemmer's heart. Albert followed it, watching as it passed into the pulmonary artery, tracing it out through the smaller vessels until it stopped squarely across a junction of two arterioles.

Kemmer coughed, his face whitening with pain as he clutched at his chest. The pain was a mild repayment for his recent agony, Albert thought grimly. A pulmonary embolism shouldn't kill him, but the effects were disproportionate to the cause and would last a while. He grinned mercilessly as Kemmer collapsed.

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A man darted from behind the chair and bent over Kemmer. Fumbling in his haste, he produced a pocket communicator, stabbed frantically at the dial and spoke urgently into it. "Medic! Boss's office — hurry!"

For a second, Albert didn't realize that the hum of machinery behind him had stopped, but when he did, both Albert and the chair vanished.

The Zark realized that its host had been hurt again. It was infuriating to be so helpless. Things kept happening to Albert which it couldn't correct until too late. There were forces involved that it didn't know how to handle; they were entirely outside the Zark's experience. It only felt relief when Albert managed to regain his ability to move — and, as it looked out upon the familiar green Antarian countryside, it felt almost happy. Of course Albert was probably still in trouble, but it wasn't so bad now. At least the man was away from the cause of his pain.

IT was a hell of a note, Albert reflected, sitting beside the road that led to Lagash and working upon the bonds that tied him to the chair. He had managed to get out of Kemmer's hands, but it appeared probable that he would get no farther. As things stood, he couldn't transmit the information he had gained — and by this time

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probably every IC office on the planet was alerted to the fact that Earth Central had a psi-type agent on Antar — one who was not inherently unstable, like those poor devils in the parapsychological laboratories on Earth. They would be ready for him with everything from Distorter screens to Kellys.

He didn't underestimate IC now. Whatever its morals might be, its personnel was neither stupid nor slow to act. He was trapped in this sector of the planet. Prime Base was over a thousand miles away, and even if he did manage to make his way back to it along the trade routes, it was a virtual certainly that he would never be able to get near a class I communicator or the Patrol office. IC would have ample time to get ready for him, and no matter what powers he possessed, a single man would have no chance against the massed technology of the corporation.

However, he could play tag with IC in this area for some time with the reasonable possibility that he wouldn't get caught. If nothing else, it would have nuisance value. He pulled one hand free of the tape that held it to the chair arm and swiftly removed the rest of the tape that bound him. He had his freedom again. Now what would he do with it?

He left the chair behind and started down the road toward Lagash. There was no good reason to head in that particular direction, but at the moment one direction was as good as another until he could plan a course of action. His brain felt oddly fuzzy. He didn't realize that he had reached the end of his strength until he dropped in the roadway.

To compensate for the miserable job it had done in protecting him from poison and neural torture, the Zark had successfully managed to block hunger and fatigue pains until Albert's overtaxed body could stand no more. It realized its error after Albert collapsed. Sensibly, it did nothing. Its host had burned a tremendous amount of energy without replenishment, and he needed time to rest and draw upon less available reserves, and to detoxify and eliminate the metabolic poisons in his body.

It was late that afternoon before Albert recovered enough to take more than a passing interest in his surroundings. He had a vague memory of hiring a dak cart driver to take him down the road. The memory was apparently correct, because he was lying in the back of a cargo cart piled high with short pieces of cane. The cart was moving at a brisk pace despite the apparently leisurely movements of the dak between the shafts. The ponderous ten-foot strides ate up distance.

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He was conscious of a hunger that was beyond discomfort, and a thirst that left his mouth dry and cottony. It was as though he hadn't eaten or drunk for days. He felt utterly spent, drained beyond exhaustion. He was in no shape to do anything, and unless he managed to find food and drink pretty soon, he would be easy pickings for IC.

HE looked around the cart, but there was nothing except the canes on which he lay. There wasn't even any of the foul porridgelike mess that the natives called food, since native workers didn't bother about eating during working hours.

He turned over slowly, feeling the hard canes grind into his body as he moved. He kept thinking about food — about meals aboard ship, about dinners, about Earth restaurants, about steak, potatoes, bread—solid heartening foods filled with proteins, fats and carbohydrates.

Carbohydrates — the thought stuck in his mind for some reason. And then he realized why.

The canes he was lying on in in the cart were sugar cane! He had never seen them on Earth, but he should have expected to find them out here—one of Earth's greatest exports was the seeds from which beet and cane sugar were obtained.

He pulled a length of cane from the pile and bit into one end. His depleted body reached eagerly for the sweet energy that filled his mouth.

With the restoration of his energy balance came clearer and more logical thought. It might be well enough to make IC spend valuable time looking for him, but such delaying actions had no positive value. Ultimately he would be caught, and his usefulness would disappear with his death. But if he could get word to the Patrol, this whole business could be smashed.

Now if he made a big enough disturbance — it might possibly even reach the noses of the Patrol. Perhaps by working through the hundred or so tourists in Vaornia and Lagash, he could —

That was it, the only possible solution. The IC might be able to get rid of one man, but it couldn't possibly get rid of a hundred — and somewhere in that group of tourists there would be one who'd talk, someone who would pass the word. IC couldn't keep this quiet without brainwashing the lot of them, and that in itself would be enough to bring a Patrol ship here at maximum blast.

He chuckled happily. The native driver, startled at the strange sound, turned his head just in time to see his passenger vanish, together with a bundle of cane.

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The native shook his head in an oddly human gesture. These foreigners were strange creatures indeed.

ALBERT, thin, pale, but happy, sat at a table in one of the smaller cafeterias in Earth Center, talking to the Chief over a second helping of dessert. The fearful energy drain of esper activity, combined with the constant dodging to avoid IC hunting parties, had made him a gaunt shadow — but he had managed to survive until a Patrol ship arrived to investigate the strange stories told by tourists, of a man who haunted the towns of Lagash and Vaornia, and the road between.

"That's all there was to it, sir," Albert concluded. "Once I figured it out that not even IC could get away with mass murder, it was easy. I just kept popping up in odd places and telling my story, and then, to make it impressive, I'd disappear. I had nearly two days before IC caught on, and by then you knew. The only trouble was getting enough to eat. I damn near starved before the Patrol arrived. I expect that we owe quite a few farmers and shopkeepers reparations for the food I stole."

"They'll be paid, providing they present a claim," the Chief said. "But there's one thing about all this that bothers me. I know you had no psi powers when you left Earth on this mission. Just where did you acquire them?"

Albert shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "Unless they were latent and developed in Antar's peculiar climatic and physical conditions. Or maybe it was the shock of that meeting with the Bandersnatch. All I'm sure of is that I didn't have any until after that meeting with Shifaz."

"Well, you certainly have them now. The Parapsych boys are hot on your tail, but we've stalled them off."

"Thanks. I don't want to imitate a guinea pig."

"We owe you at least that for getting us a case against IC. Even their shysters won't be able to wiggle out of this one." The Chief smiled. "It's nice to have those lads where they can be handled for a change."

"They do need a dose of applied conscience," Albert agreed.

"The government also owes you a bonus and a vote of thanks."

"I'll appreciate the bonus," Albert said as he signaled for the waitress. "Recently, I can't afford my appetite."

"It's understandable. After all, you've lost nearly eighty pounds."

"Wonder if I'll ever get them back," Albert muttered as he bit into the third dessert.

The Chief watched enviously. "I wouldn't worry about that," he said. "Just get your strength back.

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There's another assignment for you, one that will need your peculiar talents." He stood up. "I'll be seeing you. My ulcer can't take your appetite any more." He walked away.

Inside Albert, the Zark alerted. A new assignment! That meant another world and new sensations. Truly, this host was magnificent! It had been a lucky day when he had fallen in running from the Bandersnatch. The Zark quivered with delight-

And Albert felt it.

Turning his perception inward to see what might be wrong, he saw the Zark for the first time.

FOR a second, a wave of repulsion swept through his body, but as he comprehended the extent of that protoplasmic mass so inextricably intertwined with his own, he realized that this thing within him was the reason for his new powers. There could be no other explanation.

And as he searched farther, he marveled. The Zark was unspecialized in a way he had never imagined — an amorphous aggregation of highly evolved cells that could imitate normal tissues in a manner that would defy ordinary detection. It was something at once higher yet lower than his own flesh, something more primitive yet infinitely more evolved.

The Zark had succeeded at last. It had established communication with its host.

"Answer me, parasite," Albert muttered subvocally. "I know you're there — and I know you can answer!"

The Zark gave the protean equivalent of a shrug. If Albert only knew how it had tried to communicate — no, there was no communication between them. Their methods of thought were so different that there was no possible rapport.

It twitched—and Albert jumped. And for the first time in its long life, the Zark had an original idea. It moved a few milligrams of its substance to Albert's throat region, and after a premonitory glottal spasm, Albert said very distinctly and quite involuntarily, "All right. I am here."

Albert froze with surprise, but when the shock passed, he laughed. "Well, I asked for it," he said. "But it's like the story about the man who talked to himself — and got answers. Not exactly a comforting sensation."

"I'm sorry," the Zark apologized. "I do not wish to cause discomfort."

"You pick a poor way to keep from doing it."

"It was the only way I could figure to make contact with your conscious mind — and you desired that I communicate."

"I suppose you're right. But

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while it is nice to know that I really have a guardian angel, I'd have felt better about it if you had white robes and wings and were hovering over my shoulder."

"I don't understand," the Zark said.

"I was trying to be funny. You know," Albert continued after a moment, "I never thought of trying to perceive myself. I wonder why. I guess because none of the medical examinations showed anything different from normal."

"I was always afraid that you might suspect before I could tell you," the Zark replied. "It was an obvious line of reasoning, and you are an intelligent entity — the most intelligent I have ever inhabited. It is too bad that I shall have to leave. I have enjoyed being with you."

"Who said anything about leaving?" Albert asked.

"You did. I could feel your revulsion when you became aware of me. It wasn't nice, but I suppose you can't help it. Yours is an independent race, one that doesn't willingly support—" the voice hesitated as though searching for the proper word — "fellow travelers," it finished.

Albert grinned. "There are historical precedents for that statement, but your interpretation isn't quite right. I was surprised. You startled me."

He fell silent, and the Zark, respecting the activity of his mind, forbore to interrupt.

ALBERT was doing some heavy thinking about the Zark. Certainly it had protected him on Antar, and with equal certainty it must have been responsible for the psi owners he possessed. He owed it a lot, for without its help he wouldn't have survived.

There was only one thing wrong.

Sexless though it was, the Zark must possess the characteristics of life, since it was obviously alive. And those characteristics were unchanging throughout the known universe. The four vital criteria defined centuries ago were still as good today as they were then — growth, metabolism, irritability — and *reproduction*. Despite its lack of sex, the Zark must be capable of producing others of its kind, and while he didn't mind supporting one fellow traveler, he was damned if he'd support a whole family of them.

"That need never bother you," the Zark interrupted. "As an individual, I am very long-lived and seldom reproduce. I can, of course, but the process is quite involved — actually it involves making a twin out of myself — and it is not necessary. Besides, there cannot be two Zarks in one host. My offspring would have to seek another."

"And do they have your powers?"

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"Of course. They would know all I know, for a Zark's memory is not concentrated in specialized tissue like your brain."

A light began to dawn in Albert's mind. Maybe this was the answer to the corporate conscience he had been wishing for so wistfully on Antar. "Does it bother you to reproduce?" he asked.

"It is annoying, but not painful — nor would it be too difficult after a pattern was set in my cells. But why do you ask this?"

"The thought just occurred to me that there are quite a few people who could use a Zark. A few of the more honest folks would improve this Confederation's moral tone if they had the power — and certainly psi powers in law enforcement would be unbeatable."

"Then you would want me to reproduce?"

"It might be a good idea if we can find men who are worthy of Zarks. I could check them with my telepathy and perhaps we might—"

"Let me warn you," the Zark interjected. "While this all sounds very fine, there are difficulties, even with a host as large as yourself. I shall need more energy than your body has available in order to duplicate myself. It will be hard for you to do what must be done."

"And what is that?"

"Eat," the Zark said, "great quantities of high energy foods." It shuddered at the thought of Albert overloading his digestive tract any more than he had been doing the past week.

But Albert's reaction went to prove that while their relationship was physically close, mentally they were still far apart. Albert, the Zark noted in astonishment, didn't regard it as an ordeal at all.

— J. F. BONE

FORECAST

We would love to tell you what to expect in the next issue — dated April, on sale the first week in February — but we're waiting till the last possible moment to see how you want Galaxy to be shaped. Once we know that, fitting together issues to your specifications will be a happy task. The material is on hand, a lot of it, in all lengths, true Galaxy quality, and in case that statement worries writers, they might consider how awesomely much it takes to fill 196 pages; every time we close an issue, a carload of stories has to come in to replace the one that just left.

Novellas? Novelets? Short stories? Serials? Articles? Features? Letters? We have them all. Now which do you want, in what proportions? Send us a note with your vote now — make Galaxy the magazine you want it to be!

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GALAXY'S 5 Star Shelf

FANTASIA MATHEMATICA, edited by Clifton Fadiman. Simon & Schuster, N.Y., $4.95

ANTHOLOGIES, though composed of the creations of others, are creatures of the editor. Gestalted in the usual way, the whole is greater than its parts. And this whole book, assembled by Clifton Fadiman, has some impressive list of parts: Aldous Huxley, Branch Cabell, Wells, Koestler, Plato, Heinlein, Clarke, Ley, Lewis Carroll, and many equally distinguished others.

Fadiman apologizes for the abundant use of the Moebius Strip as plot motivator, but he needn't. There must still be plenty of fun and paradox yet to be found in that simple bit of complexity. Witness Cyril Kornbluth's delightful limerick about a burlycue queen who does a Moebius Strip.

The overall quality of the stories is so high that the reviewer is hard pressed to select the special few worthy of separate mention. So, with back to wall, I submit "Jurgen Proves It by Mathematics" by Cabell, "A Subway Named Moebius" by A. J. Deutsch, "Young Archimedes" by Huxley and "Su-

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periority" by Clarke as high peaks of this lofty imaginative range.

THE JOY WAGON by Arthur T. Hadley. The Viking Press, N.Y., $3.50

HOW many men have been reviled as candidates of a machine? So many that even Hadley's true machine candidate rings too close to the truth for comfort.

"Mike" Microvac, an endearing 3000-tube electronic calculator with a war record of Pentagon service, is calculating enough to foresee incalculable benefit for itself and its species if elected to the Presidency. It cleverly hoodwinks "Big Mac" McGowan, a political boss, into proposing candidacy and supervising "Mike's" campaign.

John G. Schneider's *Golden Kazoo* was an account of an election run on a strict advertising basis by the Madison Ave. boys. However, they appear as amateurs against this Big Sell.

What other candidate ever possessed two right hands? (McGowan had to draw the line at more. Wholesale handshaking would look weird, proving that in certain ways Mike was naive.) What other candidate could talk out of both sides of his mouth simultaneously and still make sense? What other candidate had electronic circuits built into his appendages to soothe squalling infants? Additionally, Mike understands the value of human frailty. He bowls for relaxation and can be beaten. At slack moments of the day, he relaxes at the piano. The leading screen femme fatale refers to him as "that sexy box of wires."

All in all, Microvac the candidate is at least as interesting and possibly more human than some we've seen in recent years. We're beholden to Hadley for a rib-tickling yet spine-chilling book.

DEADLY IMAGE by Edmund Cooper. Ballantine Books, N.Y., $2.00

JACK Williamson once conjured up a paradise in which Man, served by robots, was freed at last of drudgery and economic insecurity. He showed, to the best of his ability, that such a heaven is but a step from hell. Cooper has raised the entire theme one level, populating his world with androids and humans. This change alone has altered the impact completely.

For some psychological reason, it is easy to imagine a robot world dedicated to service, however restrictive, to mankind. But androids, particularly articulate and adaptable ones, somehow strike the reader as a race apart, one that can conceivably compete with Man on a survival basis.

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Cooper has seen the future in just that light. His oddly and aptly named atomic war, the "Nine Days Tranquilizer," has depopulated England to the extent that science perforce has had to develop artificial workers. From unskilled laborer to competent craftsman is merely a problem in time and evolution. Eventually, the androids become the backbone of society, administrating as well as serving. Work and constructive activity are forbidden to humans.

John Markham, government refrigeration supervisor, is the unwilling and unhappy Survivor of the atomic age, deep-frozen at the cataclysmic moment. Revived and thrust unprepared into a leisurely paradise, all responsibility gone and all wants served by his own personal android, he still asks himself, with androids capable of all the physical and mental accomplishments of mankind, who needs Man?

Judged by this excellent first novel, Cooper is another fine new English talent to join the lengthening list of Ballantine discoveries.

INVISIBLE BARRIERS by David Osborne. Avalon Books, N.Y., $2.75

GEORGE Orwell's world of 1984 was divided by mutual consent into three nations, so that a never-ending war of attrition would consume surplus capital goods. Osborne doesn't have as good an excuse for chopping his world into four parts. He postulates a super-isolationism, America First carried to the Nth, that turtlenecks the four major spheres into ignoring the existence of their neighbors. Presumably, this is a solution to the threat of atomic warfare. But what if someone peeks through the curtains?

Within his flimsy framework, Osborne has built a soundly plotted and written invasion yarn. His apportioned world lends itself without conflict to the classic Roman "Divide and Conquer." With less than a year to unite Earth against the coming invasion and against super-McCarthyism that brands subversive the mere *mention* of foreign nations, the problem is re-education of the public mind to internationalism. As agent of unity, Osborne has a reluctant big-time TV director who is a set-up, like you and me, for a big-time non-telegraphed shocker at the end.

THE FLYING SAUCER REVIEW'S WORLD ROUNDUP OF UFO SIGHTINGS AND EVENTS. The Citadel Press, N.Y., $3.75

THE above mouthful of title signifies reprinting of a full year's information from the Eng-

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lish magazine edited by le Poer Trench.

A huge segment of our flying saucer literature emanates from Britain, and by simple numerical calculation, England leads the rest of the world in sightings per sq. mile. The assorted sizes, shapes and colors of the craft involved make one wonder: if UFOs *are* space vehicles, is Earth the proving ground for *all* late-model saucers?

THE GRAVEYARD READER edited by Groff Conklin, Ballantine Books, N.Y., $2.00

CONKLIN has done terror before, in addition to his SF anthologies, but he has outdone himself with this collection. Of the twelve yarns, only Lovecraft's "The Outsider" might be overly familiar to the reader, but this prime example of HPL at his horror-evocative best can easily bear repetition. Of the others, "The Graveyard Rats," Henry Kuttner's first published story, and "Dirt" by Charles Beaumont are from the same curdled-blood school.

Bradbury's "Screaming Woman," Bierce's irreverent howl, "A Bottomless Grave," John Collier's pathetic "Special Delivery" are also top examples of their genre. And Theodore Sturgeon has written a new yarn, punning on the title, that is different from any other cemetery story you've ever read.

cemetery story you've ever read.

If you enjoy bathing in sweat, wade into this biery brew.

FRONTIERS OF SCIENCE by Lynn Poole. Whittlesey House, N.Y., $3.25

DETERMINING a profession is the most difficult decision for a youngster to make, once he passes idolatry of firemen and garbage collectors. Lynn Poole, producer of TV's excellent and award-winning Johns Hopkins Review, offers a slew of choices on the perimeters of scientific knowledge that capture the imagination as these childhood heroes never did.

Poole quotes a German scientist who, in 1895, after viewing an X-ray photo by Roentgen, said, "Today we have reached the peak of scientific discovery. There is little still yet to be found." Even today, standing as we are on so many thresholds, one hears much the same guff.

At the other extreme, Poole draws so many eye-opening pictures of the problems to be solved in chemurgy, atomics, cybernetics, etc., that he just might cause an imaginative youngster to wish wildly for a good, old-fashioned da Vinci-type universal mind.

— FLOYD C. GALE

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FOREVER

By NED LANG

Of all the irksome, frustrating, maddening discoveries—was there no way of keeping it discovered?

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

WITH so much at stake, Charles Dennison should not have been careless. An inventor cannot afford carelessness, particularly when his invention is extremely valuable and obviously patentable. There are too many grasping hands ready to seize what belongs to someone else, too many men who feast upon the creativity of the innocent.

A touch of paranoia would have served Dennison well; but he was lacking in that vital characteristic of inventors. And he didn't even realize the full extent of his carelessness until a bullet, fired from a silenced weapon, chipped a granite wall not three inches from his head.

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Then he knew. But by then it was too late.

Charles Dennison had been left a more than adequate income by his father. He had gone to Harvard, served a hitch in the Navy, then continued his education at M.I.T. Since the age of thirty-two, he had been engaged in private research, working in his own small laboratory in Riverdale, New York. Plant biology was his field. He published several noteworthy papers, and sold a new insecticide to a development corporation. The royalties helped him to expand his facilities.

Dennison enjoyed working alone. It suited his temperament, which was austere but not unfriendly. Two or three times a year, he would come to New York, see some plays and movies, and do a little serious drinking. He would then return gratefully to his seclusion. He was a bachelor and seemed destined to remain that way.

Not long after his fortieth birthday, Dennison stumbled across an intriguing clue which led him into a different branch of biology. He pursued his clue, developed it, extended it slowly into a hypothesis. After three more years, a lucky accident put the final proofs into his hands.

He had invented a most effective longevity drug. It was not proof against violence; aside from that, however, it could fairly be called an immortality serum.

NOW was the time for caution. But years of seclusion had made Dennison unwary of people and their motives. He was more or less heedless of the world around him; it never occurred to him that the world was not equally heedless of him.

He thought only about his serum. It was valuable and patentable. But was it the sort of thing that should be revealed? Was the world ready for an immortality drug?

He had never enjoyed speculation of this sort. But since the atom bomb, many scientists had been forced to look at the ethics of their profession. Dennison looked at his and decided that immortality was inevitable.

Mankind had, throughout its existence, poked and probed into the recesses of nature, trying to figure out how things worked. If one man didn't discover fire, or the use of the lever, or gunpowder, or the atom bomb, or immortality, another would. Man willed to know all nature's secrets, and there was no way of keeping them hidden.

Armed with this bleak but comforting philosophy, Dennison packed his formulas and proofs into a briefcase, slipped a two-ounce bottle of the product into a

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jacket pocket, and left his Riverdale laboratory. It was already evening. He planned to spend the night in a good midtown hotel, see a movie, and proceed to the Patent Office in Washington the following day.

On the subway, Dennison was absorbed in a newspaper. He was barely conscious of the men sitting on either side of him. He became aware of them only when the man on his right poked him firmly in the ribs.

Dennison glanced over and saw the snub nose of a small automatic, concealed from the rest of the car by a newspaper, resting against his side.

"What is this?" Dennison asked.

"Hand it over," the man said.

Dennison was stunned. How could anyone have known about his discovery? And how could they dare try to rob him in a public subway car?

Then he realized that they were probably just after his money.

"I don't have much on me," Dennison said hoarsely, reaching for his wallet.

The man on his left leaned over and slapped the briefcase. "Not money," he said. "The immortality stuff."

IN some unaccountable fashion, they knew. What if he refused to give up his briefcase? Would they dare fire the automatic in the subway? It was a very small caliber weapon. Its noise might not even be heard above the subway's roar. And probably they felt justified in taking the risk for a prize as great as the one Dennison carried.

He looked at them quickly. They were mild-looking men, quietly, almost somberly dressed. Something about their clothing jogged Dennison's memory unpleasantly, but he didn't have time to place the recollection. The automatic was digging painfully into his ribs.

The subway was coming to a station. Dennison glanced at the man on his left and caught the glint of light on a tiny hypodermic.

Many inventors, involved only in their own thoughts, are slow of reaction. But Dennison had been a gunnery officer in the Navy and had seen his share of action. He was damned if he was going to give up his invention so easily.

He jumped from his seat and the hypo passed through the sleeve of his coat, just missing his arm. He swung the briefcase at the man with the automatic, catching him across the forehead with the metal edge. As the doors opened, he ran past a popeyed subway guard, up the stairs and into the street.

The two men followed, one of them streaming blood from his forehead. Dennison ran, looking

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wildly around for a policeman.

The men behind him were screaming, "Stop, thief! Police! Police! Stop that man!"

Apparently they were also prepared to face the police and to claim the briefcase and bottle as their own. Ridiculous! Yet the complete and indignant confidence in their shrill voices unnerved Dennison. He hated a scene.

Still, a policeman would be best. The briefcase was filled with proof of who he was. Even his name was initialed on the outside of the briefcase. One glance would tell anyone . . .

He caught a flash of metal from his briefcase, and, still running, looked at it. He was shocked to see a metal plate fixed to the cowhide, over the place where his initials had been. The man on his left must have done that when he slapped the briefcase.

Dennison dug at the plate with his fingertips, but it would not come off.

It read, *Property of Edward James Flaherty, Smithfield Institute.*

Perhaps a policeman wouldn't be so much help, after all.

But the problem was academic, for Dennison saw no policeman along the crowded Bronx street. People stood aside as he ran past, staring open-mouthed, offering neither assistance nor interference. But the men behind him were still screaming, "Stop the thief! Stop the thief!"

The entire long block was alerted. The people, like some sluggish beast goaded reluctantly into action, began to make tentative movements toward Dennison, impelled by the outraged cries of his pursuers.

UNLESS he balanced the scales of public opinion, some do-gooder was going to interfere soon. Dennison conquered his shyness and pride, and called out, "Help me! They're trying to rob me! Stop them!"

But his voice lacked the moral indignation, the absolute conviction of his two shrill-voiced pursuers. A burly young man stepped forward to block Dennison's way, but at the last moment a women pulled him back.

"Don't get into trouble, Charley."

"Why don't someone call a cop?"

"Yeah, where are the cops?"

"Over at a big fire on 178th Street, I hear."

"We oughta stop that guy."

"I'm willing if you're willing."

Dennison's way was suddenly blocked by four grinning youths, teen-agers in black motorcycle jackets and boots, excited by the chance for a little action, delighted at the opportunity to hit someone in the name of law and order.

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Dennison saw them, swerved suddenly and sprinted across the street. A bus loomed in front of him.

He hurled himself out of its way, fell, got up again and ran on.

His pursuers were delayed by the dense flow of traffic. Their high-pitched cries faded as Dennison turned into a side street, ran down its length, then down another.

He was in a section of massive apartment buildings. His lungs felt like a blast furnace and his left side seemed to be sewed together with red-hot wire. There was no help for it, he had to rest.

It was then that the first bullet, fired from a silenced weapon, chipped a granite wall not three inches from his head. That was when Dennison realized the full extent of his carelessness.

He pulled the bottle out of his pocket. He had hoped to carry out more experiments on the serum before trying it on human beings. Now there was no choice.

Dennison yanked out the stopper and drained the contents.

Immediately he was running again, as a second bullet scored the granite wall. The great blocks of apartments loomed endlessly ahead of him, silent and alien. There were no walkers upon the streets. There was only Dennison, running more slowly now past the immense, blank-faced apartments.

A LONG black car came up behind him, its searchlight probing into doors and alleys. Was it the police?

"That's him!" cried the shrill, unnerving voice of one of Dennison's pursuers.

Dennison ducked into a narrow alley between buildings, raced down it and into the next street.

There were two cars on that street, at either end of the block, their headlights shining toward each other, moving slowly to trap him in the middle. The alley gleamed with light now, from the first car's headlights shining down it. He was surrounded.

Dennison raced to the nearest apartment building and yanked at the door. It was locked. The two cars were almost even with him. And, looking at them, Dennison remembered the unpleasant jog his memory had given him earlier.

The two cars were hearses.

The men in the subway, with their solemn faces, solemn clothing, subdued neckties, shrill, indignant voices — they had reminded him of undertakers. They *had* been undertakers!

Of course! Of course! Oil companies might want to block the invention of a cheap new fuel which could put them out of business; steel corporations might try to stop the development of an inexpensive, stronger-than-steel plastic . . .

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And the production of an immortality serum would put the undertakers out of business.

His progress, and the progress of thousands of other researchers in biology, must have been watched. And when he made his discovery, they had been ready.

The hearses stopped, and somber-faced, respectable-looking men in black suits and pearl-gray neckties poured out and seized him. The briefcase was yanked out of his hand. He felt the prick of a needle in his shoulder. Then, with no transitional dizziness, he passed out.

HE came to sitting in an armchair. There were armed men on either side of him. In front of him stood a small, plump, undistinguished-looking man in sedate clothing.

"My name is Mr. Bennet," the plump man said. "I wish to beg your forgiveness, Mr. Dennison, for the violence to which you were subjected. We found out about your invention only at the last moment and therefore had to improvise. The bullets were meant only to frighten and delay you. Murder was not our intention."

"You merely wanted to steal my discovery," Dennison said.

"Not at all," Mr. Bennet told him. "The secret of immortality has been in our possession for quite some time."

"I see. Then you want to keep immortality from the public in order to safeguard your damned undertaking business!"

"Isn't that rather a naive view?" Mr. Bennet asked, smiling. "As it happens, my associates and I are *not* undertakers. We took on the disguise in order to present an understandable motive if our plan to capture you had misfired. In that event, others would have believed exactly — and only — what you thought: that our purpose was to safeguard our business."

Dennison frowned and watchfully waited.

"Disguises come easily to us," Mr. Bennet said, still smiling. "Perhaps you have heard rumors about a new carburetor suppressed by the gasoline companies, or a new food source concealed by the great food suppliers, or a new synthetic hastily destroyed by the cotton-owning interests. That was us. And the inventions ended up here."

"You're trying to impress me," Dennison said.

"Certainly."

"Why did you stop me from patenting my immortality serum?"

"The world is not ready for it yet," said Mr. Bennet.

"It isn't ready for a lot of things," Dennison said. "Why didn't you block the atom bomb?"

"We tried, disguised as mercenary coal and oil interests. But we failed. However, we have suc-

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ceeded with a surprising number of things."

"But what's the purpose behind it all?"

"Earth's welfare," Mr. Bennet said promptly. "Consider what would happen if the people were given your veritable immortality serum. The problems of birth rate, food production, living space all would be aggravated. Tensions would mount, war would be imminent—"

"So what?" Dennison challenged. "That's how things are right now, *without* immortality. Besides, there have been cries of doom about every new invention or discovery. Gunpowder, the printing press, nitroglycerine, the atom bomb, they were all supposed to destroy the race. But mankind has learned how to handle them. It had to! You can't turn back the clock, and you can't un-discover something. If it's there, mankind must deal with it!"

"Yes, in a bumbling, bloody, inefficient fashion," said Mr. Bennet, with an expression of distaste.

"Well, that's how Man is."

"Not if he's properly led," Mr. Bennet said.

"No?"

"CERTAINLY not," said Mr. Bennet. "You see, the immortality serum provides a solution to the problem of political power. Rule by a permanent and enlightened elite is by far the best form of government; infinitely better than the blundering inefficiencies of democratic rule. But throughout history, this elite, whether monarchy, oligarchy, dictatorship or junta, has been unable to perpetuate itself. Leaders die, the followers squabble for power, and chaos is close behind. With immortality, this last flaw would be corrected. There would be no discontinuity of leadership, for the leaders would always be there."

"A permanent dictatorship," Dennison said.

"Yes. A permanent, benevolent rule by small, carefully chosen elite corps, based upon the sole and exclusive possession of immortality. It's historically inevitable. The only question is, who is going to get control first?"

"And you think you are?" Dennison demanded.

"Of course. Our organization is still small, but absolutely solid. It is bolstered by every new invention that comes into our hands and by every scientist who joins our ranks. Our time will come, Dennison! We'd like to have you with us, among the elite."

"You want *me* to join you?" Dennison asked, bewildered.

"We do. Our organization needs creative scientific minds to help us in our work, to help us save mankind from itself."

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"Count me out," Dennison said, his heart beating fast.

"You won't join us?"

"I'd like to see you all hanged."

Mr. Bennet nodded thoughtfully and pursed his small lips. "You have taken your own serum, have you not?"

Dennison nodded. "I suppose that means you kill me now?"

"We don't kill," Mr. Bennet said. "We merely wait. I think you are a reasonable man, and I think you'll come to see things our way. We'll be around a long time. So will you. Take him away."

Dennison was led to an elevator that dropped deep into the Earth. He was marched down a long passageway lined with armed men. They went through four massive doors. At the fifth, Dennison was pushed inside alone, and the door was locked behind him.

He was in a large, well-furnished apartment. There were perhaps twenty people in the room, and they came forward to meet him.

One of them, a stocky, bearded man, was an old college acquaintance of Dennison's.

"Jim Ferris?"

"That's right," Ferris said. "Welcome to the Immortality Club, Dennison."

"I read you were killed in an air crash last year."

"I merely—disappeared," Ferris said, with a rueful smile, "after inventing the immortality serum. Just like the others."

"All of them?"

"Fifteen of the men here invented the serum independently. The rest are successful inventors in other fields. Our oldest member is Doctor Li, a serum discoverer, who disappeared from San Francisco in 1911. You are our latest acquisition. Our clubhouse is probably the most carefully guarded place on Earth."

DENNISON said, "Nineteen-eleven!" Despair flooded him and he sat down heavily in a chair. "Then there's no possibility of rescue?"

"None. There are only four choices available to us," Ferris said. "Some have left us and joined the Undertakers. Others have suicided. A few have gone insane. The rest of us have formed the Immortality Club."

"What for?" Dennison bewilderedly asked.

"To get out of this place!" said Ferris. "To escape and give our discoveries to the world. To stop those hopeful little dictators upstairs."

"They must know what you're planning."

"Of course. But they let us live because, every so often, one of us gives up and joins them. And they don't think we can ever break out. They're much too smug. It's

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the basic defect of all power-elites, and their eventual undoing."

"You said this was the most closely guarded place on Earth?"

"It is," Ferris said.

"And some of you have been trying to break out for fifty years? Why, it'll take forever to escape!"

"Forever is exactly how long we have," said Ferris. "But we hope it won't take quite that long. Every new man brings new ideas, plans. One of them is bound to work."

"*Forever,*" Dennison said, his face buried in his hands.

"You can go back upstairs and join them," Ferris said, with a hard note to his voice, "or you can suicide, or just sit in a corner and go quietly mad. Take your pick."

Dennison looked up. "I must be honest with you and with myself. I don't think we can escape. Furthermore, I don't think any of you really believe we can."

Ferris shrugged his shoulders.

"Aside from that," Dennison said, "I think it's a damned good idea. If you'll bring me up to date, I'll contribute whatever I can to the Forever Project. And let's hope their complacency lasts."

"It will," Ferris said.

THE escape did not take forever, of course. In one hundred and thirty-seven years, Dennison and his colleagues made their successful breakout and revealed the Undertakers' Plot. The Undertakers were tried before the High Court on charges of kidnapping, conspiracy to overthrow the government, and illegal possession of immortality. They were found guilty on all counts and summarily executed.

Dennison and his colleagues were also in illegal possession of immortality, which is the privilege only of our governmental elite. But the death penalty was waived in view of the Immortality Club's service to the State.

This mercy was premature, however. After some months the members of the Immortality Club went into hiding, with the avowed purpose of overthrowing the Elite Rule and disseminating immortality among the masses. Project Forever, as they termed it, has received some support from dissidents, who have not yet been apprehended. It cannot be considered a serious threat.

But this deviationist action in no way detracts from the glory of the Club's escape from the Undertakers. The ingenious way in which Dennison and his colleagues broke out of their seemingly impregnable prison, using only a steel belt buckle, a tungsten filament, three hens' eggs, and twelve chemicals that can be readily obtained from the human body, is too well known to be repeated here.

—NED LANG

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In moving from one warehouse to another, we happened upon an all-but-buried cache of complete sets of BEYOND.

BEYOND was a princely experiment to determine whether there were enough readers to support a truly handsome, fantastically high-quality fantasy fiction magazine. There weren't, and so BEYOND reluctantly had to cease publication, after ten (10) issues.

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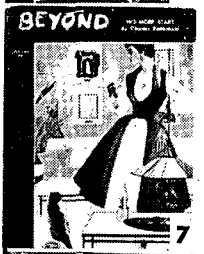

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Time Killer

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

Conclusion of Four Parts

Far from clearing the slate, dying had only doubled Blaine's troubles—and these people wanted him to die again to square himself!

Illustrated by WOOD

SYNOPSIS

THOMAS BLAINE, a young yacht designer, is killed in an auto accident. He comes to life 158 years in the future, in a different body. He is questioned by

MR. REILLY, a choleric old man, president of Rex Corporation, which has snatched Blaine's mind into the future. But Blaine is not the man they were trying to save.

MARIE THORNE, a cold and beautiful young woman employed by Reilly, tells Blaine about the

HEREAFTER CORPORATION, of which Rex is a subsidiary. This corporation guarantees, for a high fee, a life after death. Blaine also learns about

THE THRESHOLD, a ghostly interface region between Earth and the hereafter, a temporary stopping-off place for spirits before they go on to whatever is their ultimate destination.

Hereafter, Inc., has been trying to sell its version of life after death to the organized religions, without success. Reilly intended to bring a religious leader from 1958 to 2112, to endorse the scientific hereafter. Instead he got Blaine, who remembers nothing of his time in Threshold.

Reilly attempts a reincarnation into a host body, but a spirit fights him for possession, and wins.

SMITH, as the new possessor comes to be called, entered the body after it had been dead too long. He is therefore afflicted with a loathsome disease known as Zombieism. Smith has lost his memory, but thinks he knows Blaine from somewhere.

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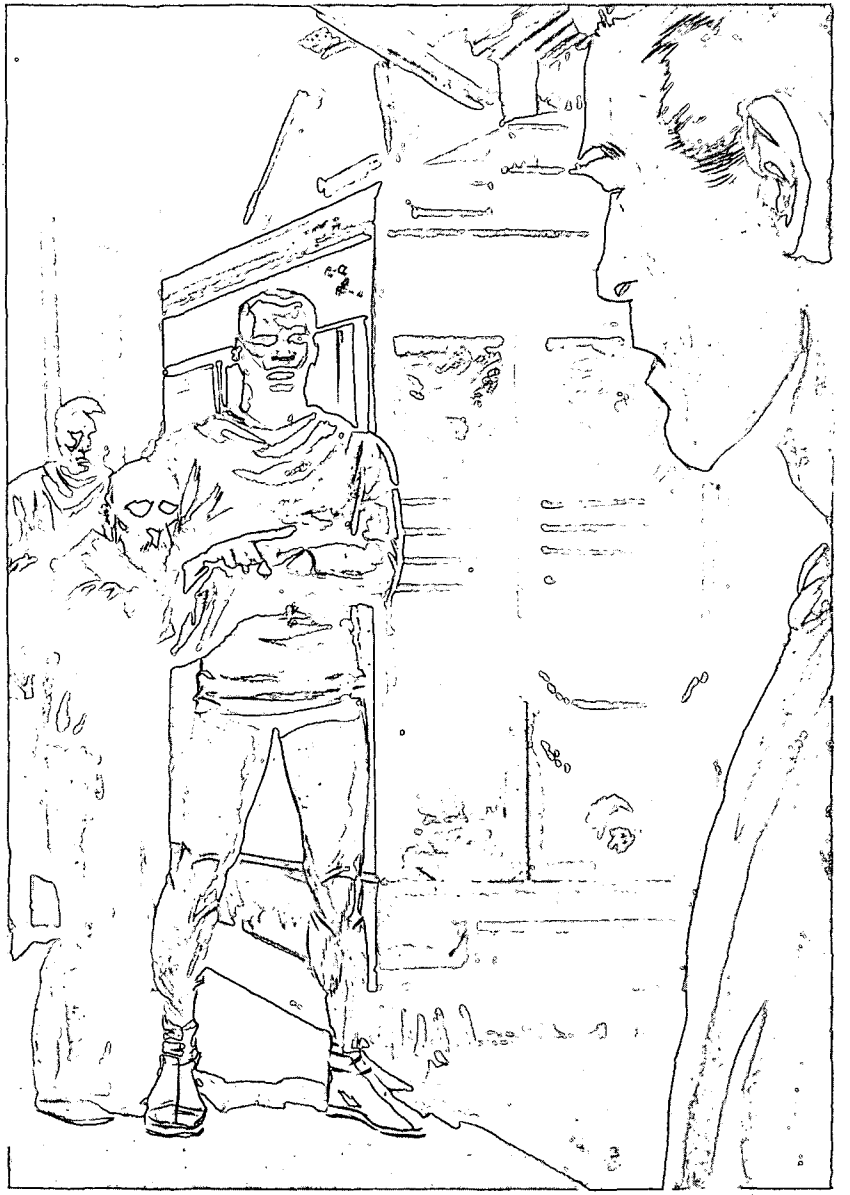

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Marie Thorne takes Blaine away from the Rex Building for his safety and turns him over to

CARL ORC, for safekeeping. But Orc is head of a gang of body snatchers. Blaine is made prisoner with

RAY MELHILL, who tells him that their bodies will be used for illegal reincarnation attempts. Blaine is rescued by Marie Thorne, who didn't know Orc's occupation. When they try to rescue Melhill, it is too late. Melhill is already dead, and his body inhabited by another man.

BLAINE goes out in search of work, but finds no jobs he can perform in the complex world of 2112. He receives a call from

THE SPIRITUAL SWITCHBOARD, an organization which maintains contact with spirits in the Threshold. He speaks with Ray, who has survived the death trauma. Melhill, now a clairvoyant spirit, warns Blaine that he will be haunted. This is a serious matter, for ghosts are destructive minds that have gone insane during the death trauma.

Blaine finds temporary employment on a hunt, a form of suicide paid for by a wealthy man named Hull. Blaine is aided through its dangers by the veteran hunter Sammy Jones.

When Blaine returns to his room, he meets his ghost, a poltergeist who tries to kill him with a levitated chair. He is rescued by the zombie Smith, who feels that his destiny is involved with Blaine's. Smith leads him underground, where the outcast zombies live. After performing an exorcism on the spirit, they find it was Reilly, blaming Blaine for the failure of his reincarnation, who was haunting him.

Blaine finds a job, and hears the sensory recording which was made when he first came into 2112. It is now being sold illicitly around the city. He meets

ALICE KRANCH, whose husband formerly occupied Blaine's body, before he sold it to Rex in exchange for Hereafter insurance.

But Blaine's biggest moment is when he is offered the greatest prize of the age—free Hereafter insurance, given as a grant from a textile organization. Blaine accepts and is given the treatment which guarantees him a life after death.

Marie tells him he accepted too hastily. The textile company is owned by the Rex Corporation. Now they can kill Blaine legally. They are planning to do so because of the recording, now being sold illegally all over. This recording shows that Blaine remembers nothing of the Threshold, in which he lived between 1958 and 2112. The organized religions can use this evidence against Hereafter, Inc.'s claims. The corporation is

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calling the record a fraud and must get rid of Blaine before he can be questioned.

Blaine leaves his apartment, but the veteran hunter Sammy Jones has already found him. For old times' sake, Jones gives him a half-hour start.

Blaine is unable to buy a weapon. By nightfall, he is hemmed in by hired killers. A subway grate gives way under him and he falls heavily. He knows he must drag himself away from the opening, to safety—but he can't. He passes out.

25.

WHEN he revived, Blaine decided that he didn't like the hereafter. It was dark, lumpy, and smelled of oil and slime. Also, his head ached, and his back felt as though it had been broken in three places.

Could a spirit ache? Blaine moved, and discovered that he still had a body. As a matter of fact, he felt all body. Apparently he wasn't in the hereafter.

"Just rest a minute," a voice said.

"Who is it?" Blaine asked into the impenetrable darkness.

"Smith."

"Oh. You." Blaine sat up and held his throbbing head. "How did you do it, Smith?"

"I nearly didn't," the zombie told him. "As soon as you were declared Quarry, I came for you. Some of my friends down here volunteered to help, but you were moving too fast. I shouted to you when you came out of the pawnshop."

"I thought I heard a voice," Blaine said.

"If you'd turned around, we could have taken you in there and then. But you didn't, so we followed. A few times we opened subway grates and manhole covers for you, but it was hard to gauge it right. We were a little late each time."

"But not the last time," Blaine said.

"Only because I opened a grate right under you. I'm sorry you hit your head."

"Where am I?"

"I pulled you out of the main line," Smith said. "You're in a side passage. The hunters can't find you here."

Blaine once again could find no adequate words for thanking Smith. And Smith once again wanted no thanks.

"I'm not doing it for you, Blaine. It's for me. I need you."

"Have you found out why yet?"

"Not yet," Smith said.

Blaine's eyes, adjusting to the gloom, could make out the outline of the zombie's head and shoulders.

"What now?" he asked.

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"Now you're safe. We can bring you underground as far as New Jersey. From there you're on your own. But I don't think you should have much trouble then."

"What are we waiting for now?"

"Mr. Kean. I need his permission to take you through the passageways."

They waited. In a few minutes, Blaine was able to make out Mr. Kean's thin shape, leaning on the big Negro's arm, coming toward him.

"I'm sorry about your troubles," Kean said, sitting down beside Blaine with overwhelming weariness. 'It's a great pity."

"Mr. Kean," Smith said, "if I could just be allowed to take him through the old Holland Tunnel, into New Jersey—"

"I'm truly sorry," said Kean, "but I *can't allow it.*" Blaine looked around and saw that he was surrounded by a dozen ragged zombies.

"I've spoken to the hunters," Kean went on, "and I have given them my guarantee that you will be back on the surface streets within half an hour. You must leave now, Blaine."

"But *why?*"

"We simply can't afford to help you. I was taking an unusual risk the first time, allowing you to defile Reilly's tomb. But I did it for Smith, because his destiny seems linked with yours in some way, and Smith is one of my people. But this is too much. You know we are allowed to live underground upon sufferance only."

"I know," Blaine said.

"SMITH should have considered the consequences," Kean continued. "When he opened that grating for you, the hunters poured in. They didn't find you, but they knew you were down here somewhere. So they searched, Blaine, they searched! Dozens of them, exploring our passageways, pushing our people around, threatening, shouting, talking on their little radios. Reporters came, too, and even idle spectators. Some of the younger hunters got nervous and started shooting at the zombies."

"I'm very sorry about that," Blaine said.

"It wasn't your fault. But Smith should have known better. The world of the underground is not a sovereign kingdom. We exist only on a toleration which might be wiped out at any time. So I spoke to the hunters and the reporters."

"What did you tell them?" Blaine asked.

"I told them that a faulty grate had given way beneath you. I said you had fallen in by accident and had crawled into hiding. I assured them that no zombie had been involved in this, that we found you and would place you back on the

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surface streets within half an hour. They accepted my word and left. I wish I could have done otherwise."

"I don't blame you," said Blaine, getting slowly to his feet.

"I didn't specify where you would emerge," Kean said. "At the very least, you'll have a better chance than before. I wish I could do more, but I cannot allow the underground to become a stage for hunts. We must stay neutral, annoy no one, frighten no one. Only in that way will we survive until an age of understanding is reached."

"Where am I going to come out?"

"I have chosen an unused subway exit at West 79th Street," Mr. Kean said. "You should have a good chance from there. And I have done one more thing which I probably shouldn't have done."

"What's that?"

"I have contacted a friend of yours, who will be waiting at the exit. But please don't tell anyone about it. Let's hurry now!"

Mr. Kean led the procession through the winding underground maze, and Blaine brought up the rear, his headache slowly subsiding. Soon they stopped beside a concrete staircase.

"Here is the exit," Kean said. "Good luck, Blaine."

"Thanks," said Blaine. "And, Smith — thanks."

"I've tried my best for you," Smith said. "If you die, I'll probably die. If you live, I'll keep on trying to remember."

"And if you do remember?"

"Then I'll come and visit you," Smith said.

Blaine nodded and walked up the staircase.

It was full night outside and 79th Street seemed deserted. Blaine stood beside the exit, looking around, wondering what to do.

"Blaine!"

Someone was calling him. But it was not Marie, as he had expected. It was a man's voice, someone he knew — Sammy Jones, perhaps, or Theseus.

He turned quickly back to the subway exit. It was closed and fastened securely.

26.

"TOM! Tom, it's me!" breathed a thin voice, with great effort.

"Ray?" called Blaine, astonished.

"Of course! Keep your voice down. There are hunters not far away. Wait now."

Blaine waited, crouched beside the barred subway exit, peering around. He could see no sign of Melhill. There was no ectoplasmic vapor, nothing except a whispering voice.

"Okay," Melhill said. "Walk

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west now. Move along quickly."

Blaine walked, sensing Melhill's invisible presence hovering near him. He said, "Ray, how come?"

"It's about time I was some help," said Melhill. "That old Kean contacted your girl friend and she got in touch with me through the Spiritual Switchboard. Hold it! Stop right here."

Blaine ducked back against the corner of a building. A heli cruised slowly by at housetop level.

"Hunters," Melhill said. "There's a field day on you, kid. Reward posted. Even a reward for information leading to. Tom, I told Marie I'd try to help. Don't know how long I can. Drains me. It's hereafter for me after this."

"Ray, I don't know how—"

"Cut it out. Look, Tom, I can't talk much. Marie has fixed a deal with some friends of hers. They've got a plan, if I can get you to them. Stop!"

Blaine stopped and found shelter behind a mailbox. Long seconds passed. Then three hunters hurried by, sidearms ready. After they turned a corner, Blaine was able to start walking again.

"Some eyes you have," he said to Melhill.

"The vision's pretty good up here," said Melhill. "Cross this street fast."

Blaine sprinted across. For the next fifteen minutes, at Melhill's instructions, he wound in and out of streets, advancing and retreating across the battleground of the city.

"This is it," Melhill said at last. "That door over there, number 341. You made it! I'll see you, Tom. Watch—"

At that moment, two men rounded a corner, stopped, and stared hard at Blaine. One said, "Hey, that's the guy!"

"What guy?"

"The guy they got the reward out for. Hey, *you!*"

They ran forward. Blaine, his fists swinging, quickly chopped the first man into unconsciousness. He whirled, looking for the second, but Melhill had the situation well in control.

The second man had his hands over his head, trying to guard himself. A garbage can cover, levitating mysteriously, was clanging angrily around his ears. Blaine stepped forward and finished the job.

"Damn good," Melhill said, his voice very weak. "Always wanted to try ghosting. But it drains . . . Luck, Tom!"

"Ray!" Blaine strained his ears, but there was no answer, and the sense of Melhill's presence was gone.

Blaine waited no longer. He went to number 341, opened the door and stepped in.

He was in a narrow hallway. At the end of it was a door. Blaine knocked.

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"Come in," he was told.

He opened the door and walked into a small, dingy, heavily curtained room.

Blaine had thought himself proof against any further surprises. But it gave him a start all the same to see, grinning at him, Carl Orc, the body snatcher. And sitting beside him, also grinning, was Joe, the little Transplant peddler.

27.

BLAINE made an automatic move back toward the door, but Orc beckoned him in. The body snatcher was unchanged, still very tall and thin, his tanned face long and mournful, his eyes narrow, direct and honest. His clothes still hung awkwardly on him, as though he were more used to levis than to tailored slacks.

"We were expecting you," Orc said. "You remember Joe."

Blaine nodded, remembering very well the furtive-eyed little man who had distracted his attention so that Orc could drug his drink.

"Happy to see you again," Joe said.

"I'll bet," said Blaine, not moving from the door.

"Come in and sit down," Orc said. "We ain't planning to harm you, Tom. Fact. Let's let bygones be bygones."

"You tried to kill me."

"That was business," Orc said in his straightforward fashion. "We're on the same side now."

"How can I be sure of that?"

"No man," Orc stated, "has ever questioned my honesty. When I'm bought, I stay bought. Miss Thorne hired us to get you safe out of the country, and we intend to do same. Sit down and let's discuss it. Are you hungry?"

Reluctantly, Blaine sat down. There were sandwiches on a table, and a bottle of red wine. He realized that he hadn't eaten all day. He started wolfing down sandwiches while Orc lighted a thin brown cigar.

"You know," Orc said, exhaling blue smoke, "I very nearly didn't take this job. Not that the money wasn't right; I think Miss Thorne was more than generous. But, Tom, this is one of the biggest manhunts our fair city's seen for quite a while. Ever see anything like it, Joe?"

"Never," said Joe, shaking his head rapidly. "Town's covered like flypaper."

"Rex really wants you," Orc went on. "They've set their little hearts on nailing your corpus where they can see it. Makes a man nervous, bucking an organization that size. But it's a challenge, a really man-sized challenge."

"Carl likes a big challenge," Joe said.

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"I admit that," said Orc. "Where there's a big challenge, there's a big profit to be made from it."

"BUT where can I go?" Blaine asked. "Where won't Rex find me?"

"Just about nowhere," Orc said sadly.

"Off the Earth? Mars? Venus?"

"Even worse than Earth. The planets have just a few towns and small cities. Everybody knows everybody else. The news would be all over in a week. Also, you wouldn't fit in. Aside from the Chinese on Mars, the planets are still populated mostly with scientific types and their families, and a few youth-training programs. You wouldn't like it."

"Where then?"

"That's what I asked Miss Thorne," Orc said. "We discussed several possibilities. First, there's a zombie-making operation. I could perform it. Rex would never search for you underground."

"I'd rather die," said Blaine.

"I would too," Orc agreed. "So we ruled it out. We thought about finding you a little farm in the Atlantic Abyss. Pretty lonely territory out there. But it takes a special mentality to live undersea and like it, and we didn't figure you had it. You'd probably crack up. So, after due consideration, we decided the best place for you was in the Marquesas."

"The what?" asked Blaine, trying to place the name.

"The Marquesas. They're a scattered group of small islands, originally Polynesian, out toward the middle of the Pacific Ocean. They're not too far from Tahiti."

"The South Seas," Blaine said.

"Right. We figured you should feel more at home there than anywhere else on Earth. It's just like the 20th century, I'm told. And even more important, Rex might leave you alone."

"Why would they?"

"For obvious reasons, Tom. Why do they want to kill you in the first place? Because they snatched you illegally from the past and they're worried about what the government's going to do about it. But your going to the Marquesas removes you from the jurisdiction of the U.S. government. Without you, there's no case. And your going so far is a sign to Rex of your good faith. It certainly isn't the action of a man who's going to blab to Uncle Sam.

"Also," Orc added, "the Marquesas are an independent little nation since the French gave them up, so Rex would have to get special permission to hunt you there. On the whole, it *should* be just too much trouble for everyone concerned. The U.S. government will undoubtedly drop the matter, and I think Rex will leave you alone."

"Is that for certain?"

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"Of course not. It's conjecture. But it's reasonable."

"Couldn't we make a deal with Rex beforehand?"

Orc shook his head. "In order to bargain, Tom, you have to have something to bargain with. As long as you're in New York, it's easier and safer for them to kill you."

"I guess you're right," Blaine said. "How are you going to get me out?"

ORC and Joe looked at each other uncomfortably. Orc said, "Well, that was our big problem. There just didn't seem to be any way of getting you out alive."

"Heli or jet?"

"They have to stop at the air tolls, and hunters are waiting at all of them. Surface vehicle is equally out of the question."

"Disguise?"

"Maybe it would have worked during the first hour of the hunt. Now it's impossible, even if we could get you a complete plastic surgery job. By now the hunters are equipped with identity scanners. They'd see through you in a moment."

"Then there's no way out?"

Orc and Joe exchanged another uneasy glance.

"There is," Orc said. "Just one way. But you probably won't like it."

"I like to stay alive. What is it?"

Orc paused and lighted another cigar. "We plan to quick-freeze you, like for spaceship travel. Then we'll ship your carcass out in a crate of frozen beef. Your body will be in the center of the load, so most likely it won't be detected."

"Sounds risky," Blaine said.

"Not too risky."

Blaine frowned, sensing something wrong. "I'll be unconscious through it, won't I?"

After a long pause, Orc said, "No."

"I won't?"

"It can't be done that way," Orc said. "The fact is, you and your body will have to separate. That's the part I'm afraid you won't like."

"What in hell are you talking about?" Blaine demanded in alarm, getting to his feet.

"Take it easy," Orc said. "Sit down, smoke a cigarette, have some more wine. It's like this, Tom. We can't ship out a quick-frozen body with a mind in it. The hunters are waiting for something like that. Can you imagine what happens when they run a quick scan over that shipment of beef and detect a dormant mind in it? Up goes the kite! *Adieu la musique!* I'm not trying to con you, Tom. It just can't be done like that. Fact."

"Then what happens to my mind?" asked Blaine, sitting down again.

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"That," Orc said, "is where Joe comes in. Tell him, Joe."

JOE nodded rapidly. "Transplant, my friend, is the answer."

"Transplant?" Blaine repeated blankly.

"I told you about it," Joe said, "on that inauspicious evening when we first met. Remember? Transplant, the great pastime, the game any number can play, the jolt for jaded minds, the tonic for tired bodies. We've got a worldwide network of Transplanters, Mr. Blaine. Dedicated people like me who know the future lies in Transplant and work to advance the cause. We're going to key you into the organization."

"You're going to ship my *mind* across the country?" Blaine asked.

"That's it — from body to body!" Joe told him. "Believe me, it's instructive as well as entertaining."

Blaine got to his feet so quickly that he knocked over his chair. "Like hell!" he said. "I told you then and I'm telling you now, I'm not playing your lousy little game. I'll take my chances on the street."

He started toward the door.

Joe said, "I know it's a little frightening, but — "

"No!"

Orc shouted, "Damn it, Blaine, will you at least let the man speak?"

"All right," Blaine said. "Speak."

Joe poured himself half a glass of wine and threw it down. He said, "Mr. Blaine, it's going to be difficult explaining this to you, a guy from the past. But try to understand what I'm saying."

Blaine nodded warily.

"Now then. Transplant is used as a sex game these days, and that's how I peddle it. Why? Because people are ignorant of its better uses, and because ignorant people in the government insist on banning it. But Transplant is a lot more than a game. It's an entire new way of life! And like it or not, Transplant represents the world of the future."

The little pusher's eyes glowed. Blaine sat down again.

"There are two basic elements in human affairs," Joe said sententiously. "One of them is Man's eternal struggle for freedom: freedom of worship, freedom of press and assembly, freedom to select government — freedom! And the other basic element in human affairs is the effort of any form of government to withhold one form of freedom or another from the people."

BLAINE considered this a somewhat simplified view of human affairs. But he continued listening.

"Government," Joe said, "withholds freedom, for many reasons. For security, for personal profit,

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for power, or because they feel the people are unready for it. But whatever the reason, the basic facts remain: Man strives for freedom, and government strives to withhold freedom. Transplant is simply one more in a long series of the freedoms that Man has aspired to, and that his government feels is not good for him."

"Sexual freedom?" asked Blaine.

"No!" Joe cried. "Not that there's anything wrong with sexual freedom. But Transplant isn't primarily that. Sure, that's how we're pushing it — for propaganda purposes. Because people don't want abstract ideas, Mr. Blaine, and they don't go for cold theory. They want to know what a freedom will *do* for them. We show them a small part of it, and they learn a lot more themselves."

"What will Transplant do?"

"Transplant," Joe said fervently, "gives Man the ability to transcend the limits imposed by his heredity and his environment!"

"Which means exactly what?"

"Transplant lets you exchange knowledge, bodies, talents and skills with anyone who wishes to exchange with you. And plenty do. Most men don't want to perform a single set of skills all their life, no matter how satisfying those skills are. Man is too restless a creature. Musicians want to be engineers, advertising men want to be hunters, sailors want to be writers. But there usually isn't time to acquire and exploit more than one set of skills in a lifetime. And even if there were time, the blind factor of talent is an insurmountable stumbling block. With Transplant, you can get the inborn talents, the skills, the knowledge that you want.

"Think about it, Mr. Blaine. Why should a man be forced to live out his lifetime in a body he had no part in selecting? It's like telling him he must live with the diseases he's inherited, and mustn't try to cure them. Man must have the freedom to choose the body and talents best suited to his personality needs."

"If your plan went through," Blaine said, "you'd simply have a bunch of neurotics changing bodies every day."

"The same general argument was raised against the passage of every freedom," Joe said, his eyes glittering. "Throughout history it was argued that Man didn't have the sense to choose his own religion, or that women didn't have the intelligence to use the vote, or that people couldn't be allowed to elect their own representatives because of the stupid choices they'd make. And of course there are plenty of neurotics around, people who'd louse up heaven itself. But you have a greater number — a much greater number — of people who use their freedoms well."

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JOE lowered his voice to a persuasive whisper. "You must realize, Mr. Blaine, that a man is not his body, for he receives his body accidentally. He is not his skills, for those are frequently born of necessity. He is not his talents, which are produced less by heredity than by early environmental factors. He is not the sicknesses to which he may be predisposed, and he is not the environment that shapes him.

"A man *contains* all these things, but he is greater than their total. He has the power to change his environment, cure his diseases, advance his skills — and, at last, to choose his body and talents! *That* is the next freedom, Mr. Blaine! It's historically inevitable, whether you or I or the government like it or not. For Man must have every possible freedom!"

Joe finished his fierce and somewhat incoherent oration red-faced and out of breath. Blaine stared at the little man with new surprise. He was looking, he realized, at a genuine revolutionary of the year 2110.

Orc said, "He's got a point, Tom. Transplant is legal in Sweden and Ceylon and it doesn't seem to have hurt the moral fiber much."

"In time," said Joe, pouring himself a glass of wine, "the whole world will go Transplant. It's inevitable."

"Maybe," Orc said. "Or maybe they'll invent some new freedom to take its place. Anyhow, Tom, you can see that Transplant has some moral justification. And it's the only way of saving that body of yours. What do you say?"

"Are you a revolutionary, too?" Blaine asked.

Orc grinned. "In a way. I guess I'm like the blockade runners during the American Civil War, or the guys who sold guns to the South Seas natives. They worked for a profit, but they weren't against social change."

"Well, well," said Blaine sardonically. "And up to now I thought you were just a common criminal."

"Skip it," Orc said pleasantly. "Are you willing to try?"

"Certainly. I'm overwhelmed. I never thought I'd find myself in the advance guard of a social revolution."

Orc smiled and said, "Good. Hope it works out for you, Tom. Roll up your sleeve. We'd better get started."

Blaine rolled up his left sleeve, Orc took a hypodermic from a drawer.

"This is just to knock you out," Orc explained. "All the apparatus is in the next room. When you come to, you'll be a guest in someone else's mind and your body will be traveling cross-country in deep-freeze. They'll be brought together as soon as it's safe."

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"How many minds will I occupy?" Blaine asked. "And for how long?"

"I don't know how many we'll have to use. As for how long in each, a few seconds, a few minutes, maybe half an hour. We'll move you along as fast as we can. This isn't a full Transplant, you know. You won't be taking over the body. You'll just be occupying a small portion of its consciousness as an observer. So stay quiet and act natural. Got that?"

Blaine nodded. "What are the Marquesas like?"

"Beautiful," Orc said, sliding the needle into Blaine's arm. "You'll like it there."

Blaine drifted slowly into unconsciousness, thinking of palm trees, of white surf breaking against a coral reef, and of dark-eyed maidens worshipping a god of stone. The god looked strangely like himself.

28.

THERE was no sense of awakening, no feeling of transition. Abruptly, like a brilliantly colored slide projected upon a white screen, he was conscious. Suddenly, like a marionette jerked into violent life, he was acting and moving.

He was not completely Thomas Blaine. He was Edgar Dyersen as well. Or he was Blaine within Dyersen, an integral part of Dyersen's body, a segment of Dyersen's mind, viewing the world through Dyersen's rheumy eyes, thinking Dyersen's thoughts, experiencing all the shadowy half-conscious fragments of Dyersen's memories, hopes, fears and desires. And yet he was still Blaine.

Dyersen-Blaine came out of the ploughed field and rested against his wooden fence. He was a farmer, an old-fashioned South Jersey truck farmer, with a minimum of machines, which he distrusted anyhow. He was close to seventy and in good health. There was still a touch of arthritis in his joints, which the smart young medico in the village had mostly fixed, and his back sometimes gave him trouble before rain. But he considered himself healthy, healthier than most, and good for another twenty years.

Dyersen-Blaine started toward his cottage. His gray workshirt was drenched in acrid sweat, and sweat stained his shapeless co eralls.

In the distance he ' ard a dog barking and saw, blur ily, a yellow and brown shape come bounding toward him. (Eyeglasses? No, thank you. Doing pretty well with what I got.)

"Hey, Champ! Hey, there, boy!"

The dog ran a circle around him, then trotted along beside him. He had something gray in his jaws, a rat or perhaps a piece

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of meat. Dyersen-Blaine couldn't quite make it out.

He bent down to pat Champ's head . . .

AGAIN there was no sense of transition or of the passage of time. A new slide was simply projected onto the screen and a new marionette was jerked into life.

Now he was Thompson-Blaine, nineteen years old, lying on his back half dozing on the rough planks of a sailing skiff, the mainsheet and tiller held loosely in one brown hand. To starboard lay the low Eastern shore, and to his port he could see a bit of Baltimore Harbor. The skiff moved easily on the light summer breeze and water gurgled merrily beneath the forefoot.

Thompson-Blaine rearranged his lanky, tanned body on the planks, squirming around until he had succeeded in propping his feet against the mast. He had been home just a week, after a two-year work and study program on Mars. It had sure been interesting, especially the archeology and speleology. The sand-farming had gotten dull sometimes, but he had enjoyed driving the harvesting machines.

Now he was home for a two-year accelerated college course. Then he was supposed to return to Mars as a farm manager. That's the way his scholarship read. But they couldn't make him go back if he didn't want to.

Maybe he would. And maybe not.

The girls on Mars were such dedicated types. Tough, capable, always a little bossy. When he went back — *if* he went back — he'd bring his own wife, not look for one there. Of course there had been Marcia. She'd really been something. But her whole kibbutz had moved to the South Polar Gap and she hadn't answered his last three letters. Maybe she hadn't been so much.

"Hey, Sandy!"

Thompson-Blaine looked up and saw Eddie Duelitle, sailing his Thistle, waving at him. Languidly, Thompson-Blaine waved back. Eddie was only seventeen, had never been off Earth, and wanted to be a spaceliner captain. Huh! Fat chance!

The sun was dipping toward the horizon and Thompson-Blaine was glad to see it go down. He had a date tonight with Jennifer Rollins. They were going dancing at Starsling in Baltimore and Dad was letting him use the heli. Man, how Jennifer had grown in two years! And she had a way of looking at a guy, sort of coy and bold at the same time. No telling what might happen after the dance, in the back seat of the heli. Maybe nothing. But maybe plenty.

Thompson-Blaine sat up and

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put the tiller over. The skiff came into the wind and tacked over. It was time to return to the yacht basin, then home for dinner, then . . .

THE blacksnake whip flicked across his back.

"Get working there, you!"

Piggot-Blaine redoubled his efforts, lifting the heavy pick high in the air and swinging it down into the dusty roadbed. The guard stood nearby, shotgun under his left arm, whip in his right, its lash trailing in the dust. Piggot-Blaine knew every line and pore of that guard's thin, stupid face, knew the downward twist of the tight little mouth, knew the squint of the faded eyes even better than he knew his own face.

Just wait, buzzard meat, he silently told the guard. Your time's a-coming. Just wait, wait just a bit.

The guard moved away, walking slowly up and down the line of prisoners laboring under the white Mississippi sun. Piggot-Blaine tried to spit, but couldn't work up enough saliva. He thought, you talk about your fine modern world? Talk about your big old spaceships, your automatic farms, your big fine fat old hereafter? Think that's how it is? Then ask 'em how they build the roads in Quilleg County, Northern Mississippi. They won't tell you, so you better look for yourself and find out. 'Cause that's the kind of world it *really* is!

Arnie, working in front of him, whispered, "You ready, Otis? You ready for it?"

"I'm a-ready," Piggot-Blaine whispered, his broad fingers clenching and unclenching on the pick's plastic handle. "I'm *past* ready, Arnie."

"In a second, then. Watch Jeff."

Piggot-Blaine's hairy chest swelled expectantly. He brushed lank brown hair from his eyes and watched Jeff, five men ahead on the chain. Piggot-Blaine waited, his shoulders aching from sunburn. There were calloused scars on his ankles from the hoofcuffs, and old seams on his back from earlier whippings. He had a raging thirst in his gut. But no dipperful of water could ever cut that thirst nothing could, that crazy thirst that brought him in here after he'd dismembered Gainesville's single saloon and killed that stinking old Indian.

Jeff's hand moved. The chained line of prisoners sprang forward. Piggot-Blaine jumped toward the thin-faced guard, his pick swung high, as the guard dropped his whip and fumbled to bring up the shotgun.

"Buzzard meat!" Piggot-Blaine screamed, and brought the pick down fair in the guard's forehead.

"Get the keys!"

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Piggot-Blaine grabbed the keys from the dead guard's belt. He heard a shotgun go off, heard a high scream of agony. Anxiously he looked up . . .

RAMIREZ-Blaine was piloting his heli above the flat Texas plains, heading for El Paso. He was a serious young man and he paid strict attention to his work, coaxing the last knot of speed out of the old heli so he could reach El Paso before Johnson's Hardware Store closed.

He handled the balky rattletrap with care, and only an occasional thought came through his concentration, quick thoughts about the altitude and compass readings, a dance in Guanajuato next week, the price of hides in Ciudad Juarez.

The plain was mottled green and yellow below him. He glanced at his watch, then at the airspeed indicator.

Yes, Ramirez-Blaine thought, he *would* make El Paso before the store closed! He might even have time for a little . . .

TYLER-Blaine wiped his mouth on his sleeve and sopped up the last of the greasy gravy on a piece of corn bread. He belched, pushed his chair back from the kitchen table and stood up. With elaborate unconcern, he took a cracked bowl from the pantry and filled it with scraps of pork, a few greens and a big piece of corn bread.

"Ed," his wife said, "what you doing?"

He glanced at her. She was gaunt, tangle-haired, faded past her years. He looked away, not answering.

"Ed! Tell me, Ed!"

Tyler-Blaine looked at her in annoyance, feeling his ulcer wince at the stab of that sharp, worried voice. Sharpest voice in all California, he told himself, and he'd married it. Sharp voice, sharp nose, sharp elbows and knees, breastless and barren to boot. Legs to support a body, but not for a second's delight. A belly for filling, not for touching. Of all the girls in California, he'd doubtless picked the sorriest, just like the damn fool his Uncle Rafe always said he was.

"Where you taking that bowl of food?" she asked.

"Out to feed the dog," Tyler-Blaine said, moving toward the door.

"We ain't *got* a dog! Oh, Ed, don't do it, not tonight!"

"I'm doin' it," he said, glad of her discomfort.

"Please, not tonight. Let him shift for himself somewhere else. Ed, listen to me! What if the town found out?"

"It's past sundown," Tyler-Blaine replied, standing beside the

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door with his bowl of food.

"People spy," she said. "Ed, if they find out, they'll lynch us. You know they will."

"You'd look mighty spry from the end of a rope," Tyler-Blaine remarked, opening the door.

"You do it just to spite me!" she cried.

He closed the door behind him. Outside, it was deep twilight. Tyler-Blaine stood in his yard near the unused chicken coop, looking around. The only house near his was the Flannagans', a hundred yards away. But they minded their own business.

He waited to make sure none of the town kids were snooping around. Then he walked forward, carefully holding the bowl of food.

HE reached the edge of the scraggly woods and set the bowl down. "It's all right," he called softly. "Come out, Uncle Rafe."

A man crawled out of the woods on all fours. His face was leaden-white, his lips bloodless, his eyes blank and staring, his features coarse and unfinished, like iron before tempering or clay before firing. A long cut across his neck had festered, and his right leg, where the townsfolk had broken it, hung limp and useless.

"Thanks, boy," said Rafe, Tyler-Blaine's zombie uncle.

The zombie quickly gulped down the contents of the bowl. When he had finished, Tyler-Blaine asked, "How you feeling, Uncle Rafe?"

"Ain't feeling nothing. This old body's about through. Another couple days, maybe a week, and I'll be off your hands."

"I'll take care of you," Tyler-Blaine promised, "just as long as you can stay alive, Uncle Rafe. I wish I could bring you into the house."

"No," the zombie said. "They'd find out. This is risky enough . . . Boy, how's that skinny wife of yours?"

"Just as shrill as ever," Tyler-Blaine sighed.

The zombie made a sound like laughter. "I warned you, boy, ten years ago I warned you not to marry that gal. Didn't I?"

"You sure did, Uncle Rafe. You were the only one had sense. Sure wish I'd listened to you."

"Better if you had, boy. Well, I'm going back to my shelter."

"You feel confident, Uncle?" Tyler-Blaine asked anxiously.

"That I do."

"And you'll try to *die* confident?"

"I will, boy. And I'll get me into that Threshold, never you fear. And when I do, I'll keep my word. I truly will."

"Thank you, Uncle Rafe."

"I'll haunt her, boy, if the good Lord grants me Threshold. First

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comes that fat doctor that made me this. But then comes her turn. I'll haunt her crazy. I'll haunt her till she runs the length of the state of California away from you!"

"Thanks, Uncle Rafe."

The zombie made a sound like laughter again and crawled back into the scraggly woods. Tyler-Blaine shivered uncontrollably for a moment, then picked up the empty bowl and walked back to the sagging washboard house . . .

MARINER-BLAINE adjusted the strap of her bathing suit so that it clung more snugly to her slim, supple young body. She slipped the air tank over her back, picked up her respirator and walked toward the pressure lock.

"Janice!"

"Yes, Mother?" she said, turning, her face smooth and expressionless.

"Where are you going, dear?"

"Just out for a swim, Mom. I thought maybe I'd look at the gardens on Level 12."

"You aren't by any chance planning to see Hal Leuwin, are you?"

Had her mother *guessed?* Mariner-Blaine smoothed her black hair and said, "Certainly not."

"All right," her mother said, half smiling and obviously not believing her. "Try to be home early, dear. You know how worried your father gets."

Mariner-Blaine stooped and gave her mother a quick kiss, then hurried into the pressure lock.

Mother *knew* — she was sure of it! And wasn't stopping her! But then why should she be stopped? After all, she was seventeen, plenty old enough to do anything she wanted. Kids grew up faster these days than they did in Mom's time, though parents didn't seem to realize it.

Parents didn't realize very much. They just wanted to sit around and plan out new acres for the farm. Their idea of fun was to listen to some old classic recording, a bop piece or a rock 'n' roll, and follow the music with scores and talk about how free and expressionistic their youth had been. And sometimes they'd go through big, glossy art books filled with reproductions of 20th-century comic strips and talk about the lost art of satire.

Their idea of a really Big Night was to go down to the gallery and stare reverently at the collection of *Saturday Evening Post* covers from the Great Period. But all that longhair stuff bored her. Nuts to art — she liked the sensories.

ADJUSTING her face mask and respirator, Mariner-Blaine put on her flippers and turned the valve. In a few seconds, the lock was filled with water. Impatiently she waited until the pressure had

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equalized with the water outside. Then the lock opened automatically and she shot out.

Her dad's pressure farm was at the hundred-foot level, not far from the mammoth underwater bulk of Hawaii. She turned downward, descending into the green gloom with quick, powerful strokes. Hal would be waiting for her at the coral caves.

The darkness grew as Mariner-Blaine descended. She switched on her headlamp and took a firmer bite on her respirator. Was it true, she wondered, that soon the undersea farmers would be able to grow their own gills? That's what her science teacher said, and maybe it would happen in her own lifetime. How would she look with gills? Mysterious, probably, sleek and strange, a latter-day mermaid.

Besides, she could always cover the gills with her hair if they weren't becoming.

In the yellow glow of her lamp, she saw the coral caves ahead, a red and pink branched labyrinth with cozy, air-locked places deep within, where you could be sure of privacy. And she saw Hal.

Uncertainty flooded her. Gosh, what if she had a baby? Hal had assured her it would be all right, but he was only nineteen. Was she right in doing this? They had talked about it often enough and she had shocked him with her frankness. But talking and doing were very different things. What would Hal think of her if she said no? Could she make a joke out of it, pretend she'd just been teasing him?

Long and golden, Hal swam beside her toward the caves. He flashed hello in finger talk. A trigger-fish swam by, and then a small shark.

What was she going to do? The caves were very near, looming dark and suggestive before them. Hal looked at her and she could feel her heart melting . . .

ELGIN-Blaine sat upright, realizing that he must have dozed off. He was aboard a small motor vessel, sitting in a deck chair with blankets tucked around him. The little ship rolled and pitched in the cross-sea, but overhead the sun was brilliant, and the trade wind carried the diesel smoke away in a wide dark plume.

"You feeling better, Mr. Elgin?"

Elgin-Blaine looked up at a small, bearded man wearing a captain's cap. "Fine, just fine," he said.

"We're almost there," said the captain.

Elgin-Blaine nodded, disoriented, trying to take stock of himself. He thought hard and remembered that he was shorter than average, heavily muscled, barrel-chested, broad-shouldered, with legs a little short for such a herculean torso, with large and cal-

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loused hands. There was an old, jagged scar on his shoulder, souvenir of a hunting accident . . .

Elgin and Blaine merged.

Then he realized that he was back at last in his own body. Blaine was his name, and Elgin was the pseudonym under which Carl Orc and Joe must have shipped him.

The long flight was over! His mind and his body were together again!

"We were told you weren't well, sir," the captain said. "But you've been in this coma for so long — "

"I'm fine now," Blaine assured him. "Are we anywhere near the Marquesas?"

"Not far. The island of Nuku Hiva is just a few hours away."

The captain returned to his wheelhouse. And Blaine thought about the many personalities he had met and mingled with.

He respected the staunch and independent old Dyersen walking slowly back to his cottage, hoped young Sandy Thompson would return to Mars, felt alarm for the warped and murderous Piggot, enjoyed his meeting with the serious and upright Juan Ramirez, felt mingled sorrow and amusement for the sly and ineffectual Ed Tyler, wished for the best for pretty Janice Mariner.

They were with him still. Good or bad, he wished them all well. They were his family now. Distant relatives, cousins and uncles he would never meet again, nieces and nephews upon whose destiny he would brood.

Like all families, they were a mixed lot; but they were *his*, and he could never forget them.

"Nuku Hiva in sight!" the captain called out.

Blaine saw, on the edge of the horizon, a tiny black dot capped by a white cumulus cloud. He rubbed his forehead vigorously, determined to think no more about his adopted family. There were present realities to deal with. Soon he would be coming to his new home, and that required a little serious thinking.

29.

THE ship steamed slowly into Taio Hae Bay. The captain, a proud native son, volunteered to Blaine the principal facts about his new home.

The Marquesas Islands, he explained, were composed of two fairly distinct island groups, all of them rugged and mountainous. Once the group had been called the Cannibal Islands, and the Marquesans had been noted for their ability at cutting out a trading ship or massacring a blackbirding schooner. The French had acquired the islands in 1842 and granted them autonomy in 1993. Nuku Hiva was the main island

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and capital for the group. Its highest peak, Temetiu, was nearly four thousand feet high. Its port city, Taiohae, boasted a population of almost five thousand.

It was a quiet, easygoing place, the captain said, and it was considered a sort of shrine all over the hurried, bustling South Seas. For here was the last refuge of unspoiled 20th-century Polynesia.

Blaine nodded, absorbing little of the captain's lecture, more impressed by the sight of the great dark mountain ahead laced with silver waterfalls, and by the sound of the ocean pounding against the island's granite face.

He decided he was going to like it here.

Soon the ship was docked at the town wharf and Blaine stepped off to view the town of Taiohae.

He saw a supermarket and three movie theaters, rows of ranch-style houses, many palm trees, some low white stores with plate-glass windows, numerous cocktail lounges, dozens of automobiles, a gas station and a traffic light. The sidewalks were filled with people wearing colorful shirts and pressed slacks. All had on sunglasses.

So this was the last refuge of unspoiled 20th-century Polynesia, Blaine thought — a Florida town set in the South Seas!

Still, what more could he expect in the year 2110? Ancient Polynesia was as dead as Merrie England or Bourbon France. And 20th-century Florida, he remembered, could be pleasant indeed.

He walked down Main Street and saw a notice on a building stating that Postmaster Alfred Gray had been appointed Hereafter, Inc., representative for the Marquesas group. And, farther on, he came to a small black building with a sign on it that said *Public Suicide Booth.*

Ah, Blaine thought sardonically, modern civilization is encroaching even here! Next thing you know, they'll be setting up a Spiritual Switchboard. And where will we be then?

HE had reached the end of town. As he started back, a stout, red-faced man hurried up to him.

"Mr. Elgin? Mr. Thomas Elgin?"

"That's me," Blaine said, with a start of apprehension.

"Terribly sorry I missed you at the dock," said the red-faced man, mopping his wide and gleaming forehead with a bandanna. "No excuse, of course. Sheer oversight on my part. The languor of the islands. Inevitable after a while. I'm Davis, owner of the Point Boatyard. Welcome to Taiohae, Mr. Elgin."

"Thank you, Mr. Davis," Blaine said.

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"On the contrary, I want to thank *you* again for answering my advertisement," Davis replied. "I've been needing a master boatwright for months. You have no idea! And frankly, I didn't expect to attract a man of your qualifications."

"Ummm," said Blaine, surprised and pleased at the thoroughness of Carl Orc's preparations.

"Not many men around with a grounding in 20th-century boatbuilding methods," Davis said sadly. "Lost art. Have you had a look around the island?"

"Just very briefly," said Blaine.

"Think you'll want to stay?" Davis asked anxiously. "You have no idea how hard it is getting a good boatwright to settle down in a quiet little backwater like this. No sooner do they get here than they want to go charging off to the big booming cities like Papeete or Apia. I know wages are higher in places like that, and there's more amusements and society and things, but Taiohae has a charm of its own."

"I've had my fill of the cities," Blaine said, smiling. "I'm not likely to go charging off, Mr. Davis."

"Good, good! Don't bother coming to work for a few days, Mr. Elgin. Rest, take it easy, look around our island. It's the last refuge of primitive Polynesia, you know. Here are the keys to your house. Number one Temetiu Road, straight up the mountain there. Shall I show you the way?"

"I'll find it," Blaine said. "Thanks very much, Mr. Davis."

"Thank *you*, Mr. Elgin. I'll drop in on you tomorrow, after you're a bit more settled. Then you can meet some of our townfolk. In fact, the mayor's wife is giving a party Thursday. Or is it Friday? Anyhow, I'll find out and let you know."

They shook hands and Blaine started up Temetiu Road, to his new home.

It was a small, freshly painted bungalow with a spectacular view of Nuku Hiva's three southern bays. Blaine admired the sight for a few minutes, then tried the door. It was unlocked and he walked in.

"It's about time you got here."

Blaine just stared, not able to believe what he saw.

"Marie!"

SHE appeared as slim, lovely and cool as ever. But she was nervous. She talked swiftly and avoided meeting his eyes.

"I thought it would be best if I made the final arrangements on the spot," she said. "I've been here for two days, waiting for you. You've met Mr. Davis, haven't you? He seems like a very nice little man."

"Marie — "

"I told him I was your fiancée,"

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she continued hurriedly. "I hope you don't mind, Tom. I had to have some excuse for being here. I said I had come out early to surprise you. Mr. Davis was delighted, of course — he wants so badly to have his master boatwright settle here permanently. Do you mind, Tom? We can always say we broke off the engagement and — "

Blaine took her in his arms and said, "I don't want to break off the engagement. I love you, Marie."

She clung to him fiercely for a moment, abruptly stepped back. "Then we'd better arrange for a marriage ceremony soon, if you don't mind. They're *very* stuffy and small-townish here — very 20th-century, if you know what I mean."

"I think I know what you mean," Blaine said.

They looked at each other and burst out laughing.

30.

MARIE insisted upon staying at the South Seas Motel until a wedding could be arranged. Blaine suggested a quiet ceremony before a justice of the peace, but Marie surprised him by wanting as large a wedding as Taiohae could produce. It was held on Sunday at the mayor's house.

Mr. Davis loaned them a little cutter from the boatyard. They set sail at sunrise for a honeymoon cruise to Tahiti.

For Blaine, it had the sensation of a delicious and fleeting dream. They sailed across a sea carved of green jade and saw the moon, yellow and swollen, quartered by the cutter's shrouds and tangled in its stays. The sun rose out of a long black cloud, reached its zenith and declined, scouring the sea into a gleaming bowl of brass.

They anchored in the lagoon at Papeete and saw the mountains of Moorea flaming in the sunset, more fantastic than the Lunar mountains. And Blaine remembered a day on the Chesapeake when he had dreamed, *Ah, Raiatea, the Mountains of Moorea, the fresh trade wind . . .*

A continent and an ocean had separated him from Tahiti, and other obstacles besides. But that had been in another century.

They would have spent more time in Papeete, but as they walked down the waterfront, they saw three zombies crouching in the shade with begging bowls. The zombies stared as they passed, then followed them. Blaine gave them alms, but the zombies still followed, mute and reproachful.

Finally Blaine stopped, turned and said, "All right. What do you want?"

The zombies didn't answer. They simply shook their heads

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and stared at his strong wrestler's body.

"Is it because of Smith?" Blaine shouted at them.

Their eyes glowed when they heard the name, but they refused to reply.

"Let's get out of here," Marie said. "The damned zombies have a worldwide organization. They probably know all about you and Smith."

Blaine and Marie went to Moorea, rode horses up the slopes and picked the white tiare Tahiti. But they came across a single frail and withered old zombie who watched them intently with reproachful eyes. And when Blaine asked him about Smith, the zombie nodded briefly.

They returned to their boat anchored in the bay below and set sail for the Tuamotos.

But there was no escaping from the silent, passive persecution of the zombies. On Atua, ten zombies came to the dockside and stood in a long line by the boat. Blaine walked out with a machinist's hammer in his hand, looking for trouble, hoping the zombies would attack him. He wanted something solid to fight against. But the zombies simply stared. They appeared as fragile as withered leaves, ten dry husks that a child could scatter, as helpless as scarecrows. But they were invulnerable in their helplessness, as strong as death.

Blaine put the hammer back in his pocket and returned to the boat.

The zombie network had spread word of Blaine even to the tiniest atolls. Sometimes singly, sometimes in groups, the zombies gathered wherever Blaine landed. The silent chorus watched his movements with great, dying, reproachful eyes; the powerless, invulnerable furies waited with a terrible, soul-destroying patience. And Blaine knew what they were waiting for.

Blaine and Marie sailed back to Taiohae. Marie started housekeeping. Blaine began to work at the boatyard, and waited.

BLAINE'S job at the boatyard was interesting and varied. The island cutters and ketches limped in with bent shafts or nicked propellers, with planks that had been splintered against a hidden coral head, with sails blown out by a sudden gale. There were underwater craft to be serviced, boats belonging to the nearby undersea pressure farms that used Taiohae as a supply base. And there were dinghies to build, and an occasional schooner.

Blaine handled all practical details with skill and dispatch. As time went by, he started to write a few publicity releases about the yard for the *South Seas Courier*. This brought in more business,

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which involved more paperwork and a greater need for liaison between the Point Boatyard and the small yards to which it farmed out work. Blaine handled this, and took over advertising as well.

His job as master boatwright came to bear an uncanny resemblance to his past jobs as junior yacht designer.

But this no longer bothered him. It seemed obvious to him now that nature had intended him to be a junior yacht designer, nothing more nor less. This was his destiny and he accepted it.

His life fell into a pleasant routine built around the boatyard and the white bungalow, filled with Saturday night movies and the microfilm *Sunday Times*, quick visits to the undersea farms and to other islands in the Marquesas Group, parties at the mayor's house and poker at the yacht club, brisk sails across Comptroller Bay and moonlight swimming on Temuoa Beach.

And, through it all, the zombies of Taiohae stayed close, and watched him, and waited.

One morning at the boatyard, Mr. Davis came over with a worried frown.

"Say, Tom, there was a fellow around here just a little while ago looking for you."

"Who was it?" asked Blaine.

"A mainlander," Davis said. "Just off the steamer this morning. I told him you weren't here yet and he said he'd see you at your house."

"What did he look like?" Blaine asked, feeling his stomach muscles tighten.

Davis frowned more deeply. "Well, that's the funny part of it. He was about your height, thin, very tanned. He wore some kind of surgical mask, but the skin didn't look right. And he stank of chlorophyll."

"Sounds peculiar," Blaine said.

"Very peculiar. And he limped pretty bad."

"Did he leave a name?"

"Said his name was Smith. Tom, where are you going?"

"I have to go home right now," Blaine said. "I'll try to explain later."

He hurried away. Smith must have found out his own identity and what the connection was between himself and Blaine. And, exactly as he had promised, the zombie had come visiting.

31.

WHEN he told Marie, she went at once to a closet and took down their suitcases. She carried them into the bedroom and began flinging clothes into them.

"What are you doing?" Blaine asked.

"Packing."

"So I see. But why?"

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"Because we're getting out of here."

"What are you talking about? We live here!"

"Not any more," she said. "Not with that damned Smith around. Tom, he means trouble."

"I'm sure he does," said Blaine. "But that's no reason to run. Stop packing a minute and listen! What do you think he can do to me?"

"We're not going to stay and find out," she said.

She continued to shove clothes into the suitcase until Blaine grabbed her wrists.

"Calm down," he told her. "I'm not going to run from Smith."

"But it's the only sensible thing to do," Marie said. "He's trouble, but he can't live much longer. Just a few more months, weeks maybe, and he'll be dead. He should have died long before now, that horrible zombie! Tom, let's go!"

"Have you gone crazy or something?" Blaine demanded. "Whatever he wants, I can handle it."

"I've heard you say that before," Marie said.

"Things were different then."

"They're different now! Tom, we could borrow the cutter again — Mr. Davis would understand — and we could go to — "

"No! I'm damned if I'll run from him! Maybe you've forgotten, Marie, Smith saved my life."

"But what did he save it *for?*" she wailed. "Tom, I'm warning you! You mustn't see him, not if he remembers!"

"Wait a minute," Blaine said slowly. "Is there something you know? Something I don't?"

She immediately grew calm. "Of course not."

"Marie, are you telling me the truth?"

"Yes, darling. But I'm frightened of Smith. Please, Tom, humor me this once — let's go away."

"I won't run another step from anyone," Blaine said. "I live here. And that's the end of it."

Marie sat down, looking suddenly exhausted. "All right, dear. Do what you think is best."

"That's better," said Blaine. "It'll turn out all right."

"Of course it will," Marie said.

Blaine put the suitcases back and hung up the clothes. Then he sat down to wait. He was physically calm. But in memory he had returned to the underground, had passed again through the ornate door covered with Egyptian hieroglyphics and Chinese ideographs, into the vast marble-pillared Palace of Death with its gold and bronze coffin. And he heard again Reilly's screaming voice speak through a silvery mist:

"There are things you can't see, Blaine, but *I* see them. Your time on Earth will be short, very short, painfully short. Those you trust will betray you. Those you hate will conquer you. You will die,

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Blaine, not in years but soon. sooner than you could believe. You'll be betrayed, and you'll die by your own hand."

That mad old man! Blaine shivered slightly and looked at Marie. She sat with downcast eyes, waiting. So he waited, too.

After a while there was a soft knock at the door.

"Come in," Blaine said to whoever was outside.

32.

BLAINE recognized Smith immediately, even with the tan surgical mask. The zombie came in, limping, bringing with him a faint odor of decay imperfectly masked by a powerful chlorophyll deodorant.

"Excuse the disguise," Smith said. "It isn't intended to deceive you or anyone else. I wear it because my face is no longer presentable."

"You've come a long way," said Blaine.

"Yes, quite far," Smith agreed, "and through difficulties I won't bore you by relating. But I got here. That's the important thing."

"Why did you come?"

"Because I know who I am," Smith answered.

"And you think it concerns me?"

"Yes."

"I can't imagine how," Blaine said grimly. "But let's hear it."

Marie said, "Wait a minute. Smith, you've been after him since he came into this world. He's never had a moment's peace. Can't you accept things as they are? Can't you just go and die quietly somewhere?"

"Not without telling him first," Smith said.

"Come on, let's hear it," said Blaine.

Smith said, "My name is James Olin Robinson."

"Never heard of you," Blaine replied after a moment's thought.

"Of course not."

"Have we ever met before that time in the Rex Building?"

"Not formally."

"But we met?"

"Briefly."

"All right, James Olin Robinson, tell me about it. When did we meet?"

"It was quite brief," Robinson said. "We glimpsed each other for a fraction of a second, then saw no more. It happened late one night in 1958, on a lonely highway, you in your car and me in mine."

"You were driving the car I had the accident with?"

"Yes. If you can call it an accident."

"But it was! It was completely accidental!"

"If that's true, I have no further business here," Robinson said.

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"But, Blaine, I *know* it was not an accident. It was murder. Ask your wife."

HE looked at his wife sitting in a corner of the couch. Marie's face was waxen. Her gaze seemed to turn inward and not enjoy what it saw there. Blaine wondered if she was staring at the ghost of some ancient guilt, long buried, long quickening, now come to term with the appearance of the zombie Robinson.

Watching her, he slowly began piecing things together.

"Marie," he said, "what about that night in 1958? How did you know that Robinson and I were going to have an accident?

She said, "There are statistical prediction methods we use, valence factors . . ." Her voice trailed away.

"Or did you *make* us have the accident?" Blaine asked.

Marie didn't answer. And Blaine thought hard about the manner of his dying.

He had been driving over a straight, empty highway, his headlights probing ahead, the darkness receding endlessly before him . . . His car swerved freakishly, violently, toward the oncoming headlights . . . He twisted hard on the steering wheel. It wouldn't turn . . . The steering wheel came free and spun in his hands, and the engine wailed . . .

"By God, you made us have that accident!" Blaine shouted at his wife. "You and Rex Power Systems — you forced my car into a swerve! Look at me and answer! Isn't it true?"

"All right!" she said. "But I didn't mean to kill you. It was Robinson we were after. He's the man your present body was intended for, Tom. In 1958 he was a liberal religious leader. Rex decided to snatch him, show him the scientific hereafter, the Threshold, reincarnation. We thought he'd endorse Rex. We could make a breach in the organized religions by using Robinson. But the calibration was off and we got you instead. And Robinson took over Reilly's body."

Blaine said, "You've known all along who he was."

"I've suspected."

"And never told me."

"I couldn't, Tom, I just couldn't. All right, it was wrong. I tried to make it up. I smuggled your recording to the religions. I helped you, watched out for you—"

"But you didn't help *me*," Robinson said.

WITH an effort, Marie turned and looked at him. "I'm afraid I was responsible for your death, Mr. Robinson. When the cars came together, your body must have died at the same time as Tom's. The Rex Power System

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that snatched him into 2110 pulled you along, too. Then you took over Reilly's body. It's worked out horribly, but we had no idea that all this would happen. We thought you'd appreciate being brought into the future and receiving actual assurance of a life after death. If the experiment had turned out right—"

"But it didn't," Robinson broke in. "And you have given me a very poor exchange for my former body and my former life."

"I know. But what can I do? The hereafter—"

"I don't want it yet," Robinson said. "I was a married man with children when you killed me. I had a mission in life. That mission must be fulfilled, my life lived out as it was meant to."

"But *how?*" she asked desperately.

Robinson hesitated a moment, then said, "I want a body. I want a man's good body that I can live in, not this decaying thing that I drag about. Blaine, your wife killed my former body."

Blaine said, "And now you want mine?"

"If you think it's fair," Robinson said.

"Now wait just a minute!" Marie cried.

Color had returned to her face. With her confession, she seemed to have freed herself from the grip of the guilt in her mind.

"Robinson," she said, "you can't ask that from him. He didn't have anything to do with your death. What's done is done! Get out of here!"

Robinson ignored her and looked at Blaine. "I always knew it was you, Blaine. When I knew nothing else, I knew it was you. I watched over you, Blaine. I saved your life."

"Yes, you did," Blaine said quietly.

"*So what?*" Marie screamed. "So he saved your life. That doesn't mean he owns it! One doesn't save a life and expect it to be forfeited upon request. Tom, don't listen to him!"

Robinson said, "I have no means or intention of forcing you, Blaine. You will decide what you think is right and I will abide by it. And you will remember *everything*."

Blaine looked at the zombie almost with affection. "So there's more to it. Much more. Isn't there, Robinson?"

Robinson nodded, his eyes fixed on Blaine's face.

"But how did you know?" Blaine asked. "How could you possibly know?"

"My life has revolved around you. I've thought about nothing but you. And the better I knew you, Blaine, the more certain I was about this."

"Perhaps," Blaine admitted.

Marie said, "What on Earth are

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you talking about? What more? What more could there be?"

"I have to think about this," said Blaine, his gaze distant. "I have to remember. Robinson, please wait outside for a little while."

"Certainly," the zombie said, and left immediately.

Without even glancing at Marie, Blaine sat down and held his head in his hands. Now he had to remember something he would rather not think about. Now, once and for all, he had to trace it back and understand it.

Etched sharp and raw in his mind still were the words Reilly had screamed at him in the Palace of Death: "You're responsible! You killed me with your evil murdering mind! Yes, *you*, you hideous thing from the past, you damned monster! Everything shuns you except your friend the dead man! Why aren't *you* dead, you murderer?"

Had Reilly known?

Blaine remembered Sammy Jones saying to him after the hunt: "Tom, you're a natural-born killer. There's nothing else for you."

Had Sammy guessed?

And now the most important thing of all, that most significant moment of his life—the time of his death on a night in 1958. Vividly he remembered:

The steering wheel was working again, but Blaine ignored it, filled with a sudden fierce exultancy, a lightning switch of mood that welcomed the smash, lusted for it, and for pain and cruelty and death . . .

Blaine shuddered convulsively as he relived the moment he had wanted to forget — the moment when he might have avoided catastrophe, but had preferred to kill.

He lifted his head and looked at his wife. He said, "I killed him. That's what Robinson knew. And now I know it, too."

33.

CAREFULLY he explained it all to Marie. She refused at first to believe him.

"It was so far back, Tom! How can you be sure of what happened?"

"I'm sure," Blaine said. "I don't think any person could forget the way he died. I remember every detail of my death. *That* was how I died."

"Still, you can't call yourself a murderer because of one instant, one fraction of a second—"

"How long does it take to shoot a bullet or to drive in a knife?" Blaine asked. "A fraction of a second! That's how long it takes to become a murderer."

"But, Tom, you had no motive!"

Blaine shook his head. "It's true that I didn't kill for gain or revenge. But then I'm not that kind of murderer. I'm the grass-roots

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variety, the ordinary average guy with a little of everything in his makeup, including murder. I killed because, in that moment, I had the *opportunity*. My special opportunity, a unique interlocking of events, moods, train of thought, humidity, temperature, and Lord knows what else."

"But you're not to blame!" Marie said. "It would never have happened if Rex Power Systems and I hadn't created that special opportunity for you."

"Yes, but I seized the opportunity," said Blaine, "seized it and performed a cold-blooded murder just for fun, because I knew I could never be caught at it. *My* murder."

"Our murder," she said.

"Yes."

"All right, we're murderers," Marie said calmly. "Accept it, Tom. Don't get mushy-minded about it. We've killed once. We can kill again."

"Never," said Blaine.

"He's almost finished! I swear to you, Tom, there's not a month of life in him. One blow and he's done for. One push."

"I'm not that kind of murderer."

"Will you let me do it?"

"I'm not that kind, either."

"You idiot! Then just do nothing! Wait. A month, no more than that, and he's finished. You can wait a month, Tom—"

"More murder," Blaine said wearily.

"Tom! You're not going to give him your body! What about our life together?"

"Do you think we could go on after this?" Blaine asked. "I couldn't. Now stop arguing with me. I don't know whether I'd do this if there weren't a hereafter. Quite probably I wouldn't. But there *is* a hereafter. I'd like to go there with my accounts as straight as possible, all bills paid in full, all restitutions made. If this were my only existence, I'd cling to it with everything I've got. But it isn't! Can you understand that?"

"Yes, of course," Marie said unhappily.

"Frankly, I'm getting pretty curious about this afterlife. I want to see it. And there's one thing more."

"What's that?"

MARIE'S shoulders were trembling, so Blaine put his arm around her. He was thinking back to the conversation he had had with Hull, the elegant and aristocratic Quarry.

Hull had said: "We follow Nietzsche's dictum — to die at the right time! Intelligent people don't clutch at the last shreds of life like drowning men clinging to a bit of board. They know that the body's life is only an infinitesimal portion of Man's total existence. Why

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shouldn't those bright pupils skip a grade or two of school?"

Blaine remembered how strange, dark, atavistic and noble Hull's lordly selection of death had seemed. Pretentious, of course, but then life itself was a pretension in the vast universe of unliving matter. Hull had seemed like an ancient Japanese nobleman kneeling to perform the ceremonial act of hara-kiri, and emphasizing the importance of life in the very selection of death.

And Hull had said: "The deed of dying transcends class and breeding. It is every man's patent of nobility, his summons from the king, his knightly adventure. And how he acquits himself in that lonely and perilous enterprise is his true measure as a man."

Marie broke into his reverie, asking, "What was that one thing more?"

"Oh." Blaine thought for a moment. "I just wanted to say that I guess some of the attitudes of the 22nd century have rubbed off on me. Especially the aristocratic ones." He grinned and kissed her. "But, of course, I always did have good taste."

34.

BLAINE opened the door of the cottage. "Robinson," he said, "come with me to the Suicide Booth. I'm giving you my body."

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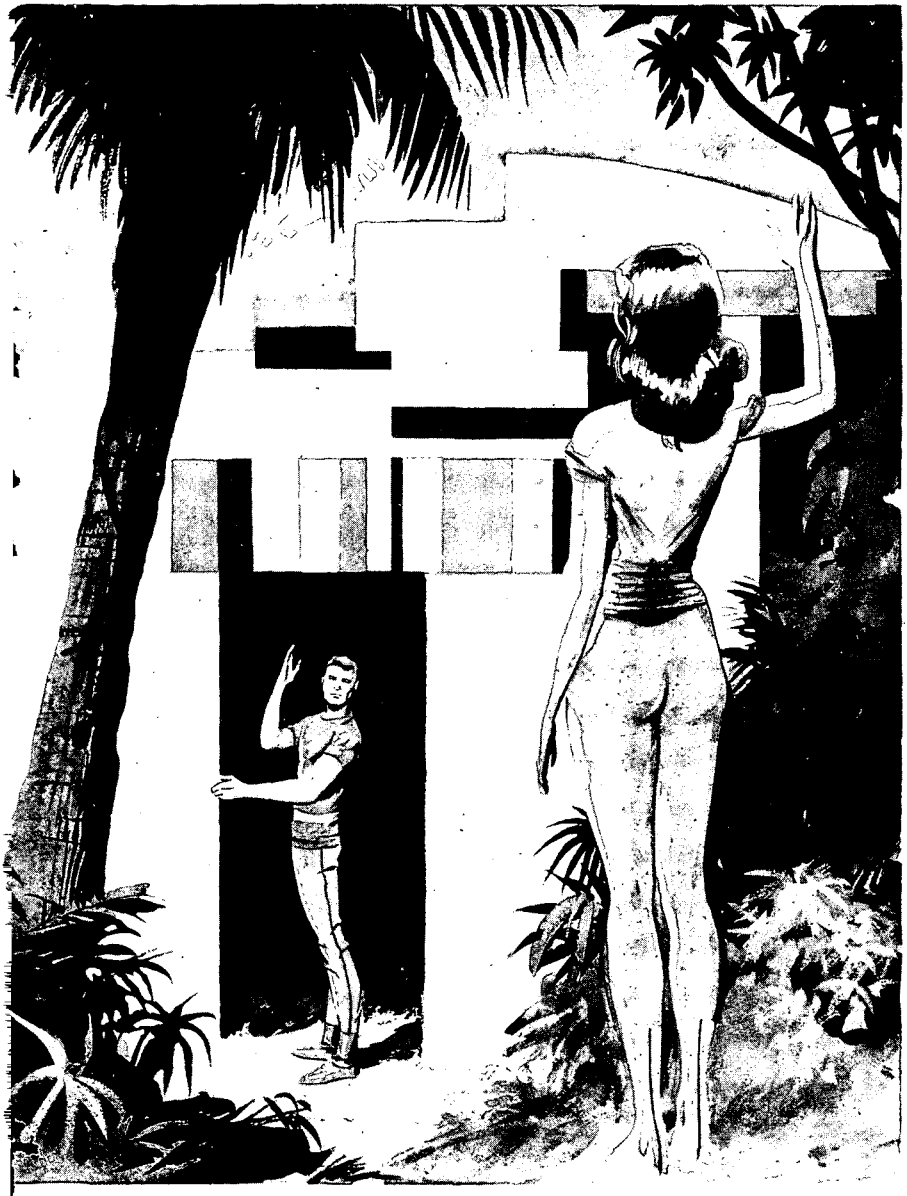

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"I expected no less of you, Tom," the zombie said.

Together they went slowly down the mountainside. Marie watched them from a window for a few seconds, then started down after them.

They stopped at the door to the Suicide Booth. Blaine said, "Do you think you can take over all right?"

"I'm sure of it," said Robinson. "Tom, I'm grateful for this. I'll use your body well."

"It's not mine, really," Blaine said. "Belonged to a fellow named Kranch. But I've grown fond of it. You'll get used to its habits. Just remind it once in a while who's boss. Sometimes it wants to go hunting."

Marie came up and kissed Blaine good-by with cold lips. Blaine said, "What will you do?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Go back to New York, I suppose."

"That's probably best," Blaine agreed.

He looked around once more at the palm trees whispering under the sun, the blue expanse of the sea, and the great dark mountain above him cut with silver waterfalls. Then he turned and entered the Suicide Booth and closed the door behind him.

There were no windows, no furniture except a single chair. The instructions posted on one wall were very simple. You just sat down and, at your leisure, closed the switch upon the right arm. You would then die, quickly and painlessly, and your body would be left intact.

He thought again about the first time he died and wished it had been more interesting. By rights he should have rectified the error this time and gone down like Hull, hunted fiercely across a mountain ledge at sundown. Why couldn't it have been like that? Why couldn't death have come while he was battling a typhoon, meeting a tiger's charge, or climbing Mount Everest? Why, for the second time, would his death be so tame, so commonplace, so ordinary?

But then why had he never really designed yachts?

AN enterprising death, he realized again, would be out of character for him. Undoubtedly he was meant to die in just this quick, commonplace, painless way. And all his life in the future must have gone into the forming and shaping of this death — a vague indication when Reilly died, a fair certainty in the Palace of Death, an implacable destiny when he settled in Taiohae.

Still, no matter how ordinary, one's death is the most interesting event of one's life. Blaine looked forward eagerly to his.

He had no complaint to make. Although he had lived in the fu-

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ture little over a year, he had gained its greatest prize — the hereafter.

He felt again what he had experienced after leaving the Hereafter Building — release from the heavy, sodden, constant, unconscious fear of death that subtly weighed every action and permeated every movement. No man of his own century could live without the shadow that crept down the corridors of his mind like some grisly tapeworm, the ghost that haunted nights and days, the croucher behind corners, the shape behind doors, the unseen guest at every banquet, the unidentified figure in every landscape, always present, always waiting—

No more!

For now the ancient enemy was defeated. And men no longer died; they *moved on!*

But he had gained even more than an afterlife. He had managed to squeeze and compress an entire lifetime into that year.

He had been born in a white room with dazzling lights and a doctor's bearded face above him, and a motherly nurse to feed him while he listened, alarmed, to the babble of strange tongues. He had ventured early into the world, raw and uneducated, and had stared at the oriental marvel of New York, and allowed a straight-eyed fast-talking stranger to make a fool and nearly a corpse of him, until wiser heads rescued him from his folly and soothed his pain.

Clothed in his fine, strong, hearty body, he had ventured out again, wiser this time, and had moved as an equal among men equipped with glittering weapons in the pursuit of danger and honor. And he had lived through that folly too, and, still older, had chosen an honorable occupation. But certain dark omens present at his birth finally reached fruition, and he had to flee his homeland and run to the farthest corner of the Earth.

Yet he still managed to acquire a family on the way, a family with certain skeletons in the closet, but his all the same.

In the fullness of manhood, he had come to a land he loved, taken a wife, and, on his honeymoon, seen the mountains of Moorea flaming in the sunset. He had settled down to spend his declining months in peace and useful labor, and in fond recollection of the wonders he had seen. And so he had spent them, honored and respected by all.

It was sufficient.

Blaine turned the switch.

35.

NEW York was cold and wintery and a high wind howled down the avenues. Marie walked to a large graystone building near

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Third Avenue. Engraved above the door was the statement: "Dedicated to Free Communication Between Those on Earth and Those Beyond."

She entered the Spiritual Switchboard, walked to the information booth and showed a slip of paper.

"That's Messages Incoming," said the pleasant, gray-haired receptionist. "Straight down the hall to Room 32B."

Marie walked down the hall and entered a small gray room with several armchairs and a loudspeaker set in the wall. She waited.

"Marie!" said a voice from the loudspeaker.

"Tom!"

"It's very good to see you, Marie."

"But why have you waited so long to contact me?" she asked. "I thought—I was afraid you hadn't made it."

"I reached the Threshold all right," Blaine said. "But I took a little while getting oriented."

"What is it like?"

"That's hard to explain. Ray Melhill tried to tell me and I didn't understand what he was talking about. But I see now. He was perfectly right — color really *is* direction, and they're both practically the same as sound. Position is what counts, because it's all a question of wholenesses. You see, in Threshold you can *experience* a framework and *perceive* it also. But there's no real dissociation. Do you understand?"

"No," said Marie sadly.

"Well, you'll see it yourself some day. Tell me, how is Robinson?"

"He's fine," Marie said. "He married Alice Kranch, you know."

"Oh, I know that. I mean has he started getting the religions together?"

"He hasn't thought about it."

"He will."

"Tom," Marie said, "what about us? Will we meet again?"

"Yes. Definitely."

"But when? Can I—can I come now?"

"No. You'll know when the time is right."

"But, Tom, what if we're separated? What will it be like in the hereafter? I don't think I'm going to like it. I'm afraid it's going to be terribly strange and ghostly and horrible."

"You're wrong," Blaine told her. "I can't explain it to you, but there's nothing ghostly about it. We'll be together, only I can't explain when."

"Oh, Tom!"

"Marie, don't worry. I've been a junior yacht designer three times in two lifetimes. It's my destiny! Surely you don't think it ends here! There's more, much more!"

"All right, Tom," she promised. "I'll wait."

— ROBERT SHECKLEY

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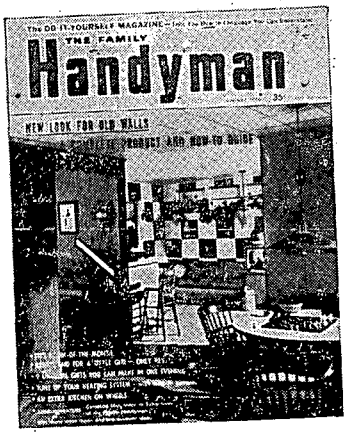

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